

To Miss Wilhelmine Huske
from

Wilfrid Owen

July 1, 1828

COLLECTED POEMS

1905-1925



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Wesley Gibson,

COLLECTED POEMS

1905-1925

BY

WILFRID GIBSON

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NOTE

THIS volume contains all his work, published during the last twenty years, that the author cares to reprint. The dates given at the front of each section are the dates of the publication of the separate volumes; the dates given at the end are the approximate dates of the writing of the poems contained in the section. Such poems as the author cares to retain from the little book—*Whin*—he has distributed among the poems in the *Neighbours* section. All the poems have been revised for this edition.

TO
MY WIFE

*I AM a part of all that I have met ;
Yet all experience is an arch wherethro'
Gleams that untravelled world, whose margin fades
For ever and for ever when I move. . . .
Life piled on life
Were all too little. . . .*

TENNYSON'S " Ulysses."

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PORTRAIT OF THE AUTHOR, from a photograph by Sherril Schell

Frontispiece

*So long had I travelled the lonely road,
Though now and again a wayfaring friend
Walked shoulder to shoulder and lightened the load,
I often would think to myself as I strode—
No comrade will journey with you to the end.*

*And it seemed to me, as the days went past
And I gossiped with cronies or brooded alone
By wayfaring fires, that my fortune was cast
To sojourn by other men's hearths to the last
And never to come to my own hearthstone.*

*The lonely road no longer I roam :
We met, and were one in the heart's desire :
Together we came through the wintry gloam
To the little old house by the Greenway home
And crossed the threshold and kindled the fire.*

THE OLD NAIL-SHOP,
THE GREENWAY, 1914.

FROM "THE NETS OF LOVE"
(1905)

THE LAMBING

SOFTLY she slept in the night—her newborn bairn at her breast,
A wee warm crinkled hand to the dimpling bosom pressed—
As I rose from her side to go, though sore was my heart to stay,
To the ease of the labouring ewes that else would have died before
day.

Banking the peats on the hearth, I reached from the rafter-hook
My lanthorn and kindled the wick ; and taking my plaid and my
crook,
I lifted the latch and turned once more to see if she slept ;
And looked on the slumber of peace ere into the night I stepped—

Into the swirling dark of the driving, blinding sleet,
And a world that seemed to sway and slip from under my feet
As if rocked in the wind that swept the starless roaring night,
Yet fumed in a fury vain at my lanthorn's shielded light.

Clean-drenched in the first wild gust I battled across the garth
And passed through the clashing gate—the warm peat-glow of the
hearth
And the quiet of love in my breast, the craven voices to quell,
As I set my teeth to the wind and turned to the open fell.

Over the tussocky bent I strove till I reached the fold—
My brow like ice and my hands so numbed that they scarce could
hold
My crook or unloosen the pen ; but I heard a lamb's weak cries
As the gleam of my lanthorn lit the night of its newborn eyes.

Toiling and trembling I watched each young life struggle for
breath—
Fighting till dawn for my flock with the oldest of herdsman, death ;
And glad was my heart when at last the stackyard again I crossed,
And thought of the labour well-over with never a yearling lost.

But as I came to the door of my home, drawing wearily nigh,
 I heard with a boding heart a feeble whickering cry
 Like a motherless yeanling's bleat ; and I stood in the dawn's
 grey light,
 Afraid of I knew not what, sore spent with the toil of the night.

Then setting a quaking hand to the latch, I opened the door,
 And shaking the cold from my heart, I stumbled across the floor
 To the bed where she lay so quiet, calm-bosomed, in dreamless
 rest,
 And the wailing baby clutched in vain at the lifeless breast.

I looked on the still white face, then sank with a cry by the bed,
 And knew that the hand of death had stricken my whole joy dead—
 My flock, my world, and my heart—with my love at a single blow ;
 And I cried " I, too, will die ! " and it seemed that life ebbed low

And the shadow of death drew nigh : when I felt the touch on my
 cheek
 Of a little warm hand out-thrust, and I heard that wail so weak ;
 And knowing that not for me yet was there ease from love or
 strife,
 I caught the babe to my breast and looked in the eyes of life.

THE FIRE

BRUSHWOOD and broom I bring to feed my fire,
 Brief-flaming bracken, brittle-flaring ling,
 Quick-crackling gorse and cones that smouldering sing
 With sappy hiss as blue flames jet and spire.

Beechmast and leaves through long years bedded deep,
 Pine-needles stacked about rock-rooted firs
 In woodland hollows where no echo stirs—
 I bring to feed the fire that shall not sleep.

Fiercely it leaps exultant in the night
 In fresh-fed fury roaring to the stars,
 While gaunt black shadows move among the scars
 Whose craggy spurs are tipped with golden light.

By night and day the perishing bright flame
Wind-flourished flares and fails, yet never dies,
But lives that I therein may see your eyes—
Those fire-bright eyes my love could never tame

Which from the white heat of the burning core
Look out upon me as I gaze and gaze.
I bring fresh boughs to feed the hungry blaze
That fire may burn your heart for evermore

Wherever in far southern lands you roam,
By what marshlight of wandering passion led :
For tumbled, cold and empty lies my bed,
Deserted, bare and wind-swept is my home.

Without foreboding from the fold I turned
To come to you, but over the heather-thatch
No smoke of welcome curled : I raised the latch ;
No fire of welcome on the hearthstone burned.

I called your name : I climbed the ladder-stair
Up to the roof-tree chamber, raftered-low :
The sunset filled it with a golden glow
Of mocking light, but you I found not there.

Long, long I called your name in bield and byre
And fold and shieling, over hill and dale.
Your heart heard not. With hands that never fail
I feed and feed the ever-failing fire.

Wide-eyed, nor ever slumbering night or day,
I watch the flame that feeds upon my life,
That trampling shower or thunder's crashing strife
Shall never quench till all be burned away—

Till, when at last consumed and spent I fall
In cold grey ash of passion's fiery gold,
Wherever you be your heart will shudder cold,
Your feet will turn to answer to my call.

THE HAYMAKERS

LAST night as in my bed awake
I fretted for the day
I heard the landrail's constant crake
Among the unmown hay ;

And in my head the thought that burned
And parched my lips and throat
Was like a wheel of fire that turned
On that hot aching note.

But with the crowing of the cock
The hours of waiting passed,
And slowly a shrill-chiming clock
Struck out the night at last.

I rose and soon my hot eyes roved
Over meadows dewy-deep,
That in the wind of morning moved
As if they turned from sleep ;

And where the crimson-rambler wreathed
The casement of my room
On my hot brow the cool air breathed
As on each fading bloom.

I watched the martin wheel and poise
Above his nested mate,
When clear through morning's murmurous noise
I heard a clicking gate

As down the dipping meadow-road
He bore with easy pace
His shouldered scythe, and brightly glowed
The dawnlight on his face.

All morn with swinging chorus blithe,
Unwearied through cool hours,
Was heard the swishing of the scythe
Among the grass and flowers ;

All morn behind the swaying row
Of shoulders brown and bare
I followed, glad at heart to know
He moved before me there ;

And as I laboured with the rake
Among the stricken grass,
Lightfooted in the mowers' wake
The happy hours did pass.

Too quick they went, and all too soon
The hour of resting came,
When over withering fields the noon
Hung like a still blue flame.

For as in shadow green and cool
He sank down wearily
Beside an alder-shaded pool,
He never turned to me ;

And though afar beneath the briar
I watched him where he lay,
He knew not that my eyes afire
Burned brighter than the day.

And yet so loudly in my breast
Beat my tormented heart,
As if to rouse him from his rest,
I thought to see him start

As one awaked from midnight sleep
By knocking in the dark ;
But in his eyes' unclouded deep
There gleamed no kindling spark.

.
To-night no rails unresting crake
'Mid fallen grass and flowers ;
Naught stirs, and yet I lie awake
And count the crawling hours ;

And as I watch the glimmering light
I await dawn tremblingly,
Lest in the quiet of the night
His heart has turned to me—

Lest I should find the day has come,
 As yet the day shall rise,
 When he shall stand before me dumb,
 The fire within his eyes.

ROMAN'S LEAP

THEY found you nigh the foot of Roman's Leap,
 Deep-buried in the bracken's rustling gold,
 Your arm beneath you bent, your brown face cold :
 Yet all unheeding round you grazed your sheep.

They found you nigh the foot of Roman's Leap :
 They laid you on a hurdle, bracken-strewn :
 They bore you home beneath the waning moon,
 With laboured breathing up the craggy steep.

They found you nigh the foot of Roman's Leap :
 Their whispering shadows darkened in the door :
 Their griding hobnails crossed the sanded floor
 As in with them the whole night seemed to sweep.

They found you nigh the foot of Roman's Leap :
 They laid you out upon the fourpost-bed,
 Two candles at your feet, two at your head,
 Salt on your breast your soul from harm to keep.

They found you nigh the foot of Roman's Leap.
 Day glimmers wanly at the blinded pane :
 Yet you will never wake at dawn again
 And from my side in tender silence creep.

They found you nigh the foot of Roman's Leap,
 Deep-buried in the bracken's rustling gold :
 Dumb sorrow in my heart is frozen cold :
 Unloose your clutch, O death, that I may weep !

THE ARROW

By peat-black waters flecked with foam
She lay beneath the flaming West :
I plucked the arrow from her breast,
And staunched the wound and bore her home.

Before the hearth's warm glowing peat
I laid her on my bracken-bed,
And loosed the dank hair round her head,
And chafed the snow-cold hands and feet

Until the living colour crept
Through her sweet body, and her eyes .
Looked into mine with still surprise
Once only, ere she softly slept.

Yet, though she wakened not nor stirred,
I gazed in those dark eyes all night
Within the peat-glow, till the light
Of morning roused some restless bird,

When in the dawning's drowsy grey
With watching spent I fell asleep,
And slumbered till the bleat of sheep
Awakened me and it was day.

Cold on my brow I felt the wind
That gently flapped the unsnecked door
And stirred the bracken on the floor,
Whereon I looked and thought to find

Beauty yet slumbering in the gold
Of withered fern : but no dark head
Now nestled in the bracken-bed
That rustled in the dawn-wind cold ;

And she was gone I knew not where :
I only knew that I must go
To seek her ever high and low
By hills and valleys of despair.

So flinging wide the flapping door
I turned my back upon my home.
By peat-black waters flecked with foam
From dawn till dark for evermore

By moss and fell I keep my quest,
Grown old and frail with failing breath,
Though now I know that only death
May pluck the arrow from my breast.

STONEFOLDS
(1907)

*THE ragged heather-ridge is black
Against the sunset's frosty rose :
With rustling breath down syke and slack
The icy eager north-wind blows.*

*It shivers through my hair and flicks
The blood into my tingling cheek,
And with adventurous urging pricks
My spirit that in drowsy reek*

*Of glowing peats had dreamt too long,
Crouched in the cosy inglenook,
Till life seemed vainer than the song
The kettle sings upon the crook—*

*Till life seemed vainer than the puff
Of steam that perished in hot air,
A fretful fume, a vapour-stuff
Of gusty passion, cloudy care.*

*But as once more I watch the stars
Rekindle in the glittering west
Beyond the fell-tops naked scars,
Life rouses in me with new zest.*

*The immortal wakens in my blood
Beneath the wind's relentless thresh,
And universal life at flood
Breaks through the bonds of bone and flesh.*

*I scale the utmost peak of night,
The eternal breath upon my face,
Till borne on wings of singing light
I lose myself in starry space.*

STONEFOLDS

The living-room of Stonefolds, a shepherd's house on the fells. A door opens on to the yard, another to the back of the house. NICHOLAS THIRLWALL, an infirm old shepherd, sits on the settle by the peat-fire with his back to the outer door. His wife, RACHEL, moves about, putting things away in a cupboard, tending the fire and doing other odd jobs. A clock in the corner ticks loudly. Storm rages without.

NICHOLAS. Is Ralph there ?

RACHEL. Nay, he's gone back to the fold.

NICHOLAS. If only I might go with him ! It's strange
The year's lambs should be born, and I not there.
The labouring ewes will miss my hand to-night :
Though Ralph's a careful fellow, he is young :
And six and fifty lambings have I seen.
It's hard, gey hard that I sit crippled here
When there's so much to do, so much to do—
That I, who should be tending the young lambs,
As helpless as a yeanling crouch and shake
Beside the peats and shudder at the night.

RACHEL. It's a wild night : see how beneath the door
The snow has silted : it's a perilous night
For young things to be born. Hark to the wind !

NICHOLAS. Ay, it's the lambing-storm.

RACHEL. I'll set a pan
Of milk on the hob to heat—for Ralph may bring
Some motherless lamb to tend before the fire.

NICHOLAS. It's hard that every one may help but me—
While I have seen so many young things born,
So many perish in my time. Worn-out,
Useless, and old, I sit before the fire
Chafing my hands that once were never cold
And now are never warm. I sit and shake
Like quaking-grass, and cannot even rise
To shift my seat or turn my hand to aught,
When there's so much to do.

(A noise as of some one knocking the snow off his boots against the threshold.)

What's that ?

RACHEL.

It's Ralph.

(*The door opens and RALPH MOOR, their nephew, comes in, white with snow, carrying a lanthorn, and a new-born lamb wrapped in his plaid. He looks about him as though expecting to see some one with NICHOLAS and RACHEL; then with a sigh he sets down the lanthorn on the table, carries the lamb to the hearth and lays it on the rug before the fire, while RACHEL fills a bottle with warm milk.*)

RALPH. The old lame ewe is dead. I've brought her lamb
To lie before the fire; but it is weak
And like to die.

NICHOLAS. Had I but tended her!

RALPH. The ewe was old.

NICHOLAS. Ay, ay, the ewe was old,
And so must die, and none pay any heed!
I too am old—I too am growing old.

RALPH (*to RACHEL, who is kneeling by the lamb*).
You keep the yeanning warm till I come back:
I doubt if it can live; but I must go.

[*Takes his lanthorn and goes out.*]

RACHEL. Ralph's a good lad and has a tender heart.

NICHOLAS. Ay, he's a careful fellow. He should wed.
At his age I'd been married nigh a year.

RACHEL. But Ralph will never wed.

NICHOLAS. Why should he not?
A likely lad enough—why should he not?

RACHEL. It's just a year to-night since Ruth left home.

NICHOLAS. Ruth! What of Ruth? The lass has made her bed,
And she must lie upon it now.

RACHEL. Poor Ruth!
Yet Ralph will never wed.

NICHOLAS. How can you tell?

RACHEL. I watch him as he sits before the fire
Each night in his own corner, with still eyes
That stare and stare into the glowing peats
Until they burn as fiercely as the glare
On which they feed; and sometimes suddenly
His fingers grip the settle till it shakes;
And when I speak he heeds not till the light
Has perished from his eyes, and dull as ash
They look upon the crumbling peat once more.

NICHOLAS. A woman's fancies! Ralph is not a boy

To peak and pine because a silly wench,
 Who if she'd had but wit had been his wife,
 Flits one fine night. O Ruth, to give up Ralph
 For that young wastrel, Michael! Ralph must wed
 The sooner if he broods: a wife and bairns
 Will leave him little time for idle brooding.
 He's not the fool his father was.

RACHEL.

Poor Ruth!

Yet Ralph will never wed. At other times
 I see him sit and hearken all night long
 As though he fretted for some well-known foot—
 Listening with his whole body like a hare—
 Bolt-upright on the settle, every nerve
 Astrain to catch the never-falling sound
 Of home-returning steps. Only last night
 I watched him till my heart was sore for him:
 He seemed to listen with his very eyes
 Glittering like some wild creature's.

(*The clock strikes.*)

It's gone ten.

Come, Nicholas, I will help you to your bed.

NICHOLAS. Nay, nay—I'll not to bed to-night! Why, lass,
 I have not gone to bed at lambing-time
 Since I could hold a lanthorn—that must be
 Nigh sixty years; and I'll not sleep to-night.
 Though I be as much use asleep as waking
 Since my legs failed me, yet I could not sleep.
 I can but sit and think about the lambs
 That in the fold are opening wondering eyes,
 Poor new-born things!

RACHEL.

This one lies very still.

I'll get more peats to heap upon the fire.

It's cold maybe.

[*Goes through the inner door.*]

NICHOLAS. It's weak and like to die.

(*The outer door opens slowly and RUTH, their daughter, enters wearily with hesitating steps. She is dressed in a cloak which is covered with snow. She pauses uncertainly in the middle of the room and looks at her father, who, unaware of her presence, still sits gazing at the lamb, which opens its mouth as if to bleat, but makes no sound.*)

NICHOLAS. Poor bleating beast, we two are much alike
 At either end of life, though scarce an hour

You've been in this rough world, and I, so long
 That death already has me by the heels ;
 For neither of us can stir to help himself,
 And both must bleat for other's aid. This world
 Is rough and bitter to the newly born,
 But far more bitter to the nearly dead.

RUTH (*softly*). Father !

NICHOLAS (*not hearing her and still mumbling to himself*).

I've seen so many young things born,

So many perish !

(RACHEL enters and, seeing RUTH, drops the peats which she is carrying, and folds her to her breast.)

RACHEL. Ruth ! My bairn ! My bairn !

NICHOLAS (*still gazing at the fire*).

Why harp on Ruth ? The lass has made her bed . . .

RUTH (*tottering towards him and kneeling on the rug by his side*).
 Father !

NICHOLAS. What, is it Ruth ? (*Fondling her*) My lass, my lass !
 Why, you are cold ; and you are white with snow !
 You shiver too like any new-born lamb.

(RACHEL meanwhile strips off RUTH'S cloak and fills a cup with milk from the pan on the hob.)

RUTH. I thought I never should win home ; the snow
 Was all about me : even now my eyes
 Are blinded by the whirling white that stung
 My face like knotted cords and in my ears
 Rustled of death—of cold white swirling death :
 I thought I never should win home again
 With that wild night against me. How I fought !
 I was so weary I was fain at whiles
 To strive no more against the cruel night,
 And could have lain down gladly in a drift
 As in my bed to die . . . had I not known . . .
 Yet, knowing, I dared not. But I am dazed.

RACHEL (*holding the cup to RUTH'S lips*).
 Come drink this milk : 'twas heated for the lambs.
 I little knew 'twas for my own poor lamb
 I set it on the hob an hour ago !

RUTH (*seeing for the first time the lamb on the hearth*).
 The lambs ? I had forgotten—I am dazed.

This is the lambing-time, and Ralph . . . and Ralph . . .

NICHOLAS. Is in the fold where I should be if I . . .

RUTH (*bending over the lamb*). Ah, what a night to come into the world,
 Poor motherless thing—and those poor patient mothers !
 I might have known it was the lambing storm.

(*She moans and almost falls, but RACHEL stays her in her arms.*)

RACHEL. Lass, you are ill.

RUTH. Yes, I am near my time.

RACHEL (*raising her from the ground and supporting her*).
 Come, daughter, your own bed awaits you now,
 And has awaited you these many nights.
 Come, Ruth. (*They move slowly across the room.*)

RUTH. I thought I never should win home.

NICHOLAS (*as they pass into the inner room*).
 Yes, I have seen so many young things born,
 So many perish ! Rachel ! They are gone,
 And we're alone again, the lamb and I.
 Poor beast, poor beast, has she forgotten you,
 Now that her own stray lamb is home again ?
 You lie so still and bleat no longer now.
 It's only I bleat now. Happen you're dead
 And will not bleat again, nor need to bleat,
 Because you're spared by death from growing old ;
 And it can scarce be long till death's cold clutch
 Shall stop my bleating too.

(*He sits gazing into the fire and dozes. Time passes. The cry of a new-born baby is heard from the next room.*)

NICHOLAS (*mumbling half-asleep*). Yes, I have seen
 So many young things born, so many perish !

(*He dozes again. After a while RACHEL enters, carrying a baby wrapped in a blanket which she lays on the rug before the fire.*)

RACHEL. See, Nicholas ! Wake up ! It is Ruth's bairn.

NICHOLAS (*waking*). Ruth's bairn ! Why, Ruth is but a bairn herself.

RACHEL. Don't sleep again, for you must watch the wean
 While I go back to Ruth. She lies so still,
 So still and cold, and knows naught of the child.
 Unless she rouses she can't last till day. [*Goes into the other room.*]

NICHOLAS. So many young things perish, and I, so old,
 Am left to sit all day with idle hands,
 And can do naught to save them.

(The knocking of snowy boots against the threshold is heard again. The door opens and RALPH enters with his lanthorn.)

Is that Ralph ?

(RALPH goes towards the lamb, but, seeing the young child, stands staring at it in amazement.)

RALPH. Uncle, what bairn is this ?

NICHOLAS.

Lad, Ruth is home.

RALPH. Ruth has come home ! I knew that she would come.

She could not stay, though held so long from me,
For I have ever called her in my heart
By day and night through all the weary year :
I knew—I knew that she would come to-night
Through storm and peril ; and within the fold
My heart has gone out to the labouring ewes
And new-born lambs and all weak helpless things.
And yet I might have killed her ! though I sought
Only to draw her to my shielding breast :
She might have fallen by the way and died
On such a night as this ! I never thought—
In all the selfish cruelty of my love
I never thought. . . . She shall not stray again :
My heart, that's drawn her from the perilous night,
May never let her go.

(RACHEL, entering, is about to speak, but seeing RALPH, hesitates.)

RALPH *(to RACHEL)*. Ruth has come home !

And we shall never let her go again.

RACHEL *(speaking slowly)*. Ay, Ruth is home.

(Goes to the hearth and takes the child in her arms.)

You poor, poor motherless bairn !

(RALPH gazes at her as though stunned, then bends over the lamb.)

RALPH. It's dead : I must go back now to the fold.

I shall be there till morning.

[He crosses to the door and goes out.]

RACHEL *(calling after him)*. Ralph ! your plaid !

(She follows to the door and opens it. Snow drifts into the room.)

RACHEL. He's gone without his lanthorn and his plaid !

God keep him safe on such a night ! Poor Ralph !

Ruth's bairn no longer breathes : 'twas dead when I

Took it up in my arms—but I daren't tell him
Just after I had broken . . .

(Laying the child by the dead lamb.)

To-night has death

Shown pity to the motherless and weak
And folded them in peace. How sweet they sleep !

NICHOLAS. We two have seen so many young things born,
So many perish, yet death takes us not.
Wife, shut the door ; that wind blows through my bones.
It's a long night.

(The clock strikes.)

What hour is that ?

RACHEL.

It's one :

The night is over.

NICHOLAS.

Yet another day !

THE BRIDAL

The living-room of Bleakridge, a solitary shepherd's cottage on the fells. In one corner is a four-post bed on which ANN SHIELD, an old bedridden woman, lies sleeping unseen behind the closed curtains. On the table in the middle of the room a meal is spread. The latch clicks, the door opens and HUGH SHIELD, ANN'S son, enters, glancing towards the bed, then turns to hold open the door for ESTHER SHIELD, his bride, who follows him into the room.

HUGH. Wife, welcome home !

(He embraces her and leads her to a chair.)

Come, rest, for you are tired.

ESTHER. No, I'm not weary. *(Looking towards the bed.)*

Does your mother sleep ?

HUGH *(crossing to the bed and peering betwixt the curtains).*

Ay, she sleeps sound and we'll not waken her ;

For she is ever fretful when she wakes.

It would not do to break the news . . .

ESTHER.

The news !

Did she not know we were to wed to-day ?

HUGH. She didn't know I was to wed at all.

ESTHER. Hugh ! Why did you not tell her ?

HUGH.

I don't know.

I would have told her when I spoke to you,
Just seven weeks since—it seems so long ago !
But when I breathed your name she put me off
Before I'd told my will. She's sorely failed
And wanders in her speech ; a chance word serves
To scare her like a shadow-startled ewe
And send her old mind rambling through the past
Till I can scarce keep pace with her. Next morning
I spoke, and still she would not hear me out ;
And yet she ever liked you, lass, and naught
She spoke against you ; only her poor wits
Are like a flock of sheep without a herd,
And so she mumbled idle driftless things,
Unless it was a mother's jealous fear
That made her cunning, and she sought to turn
My thoughts from you. Old people aye dread change.

ESTHER. You should have told her ere we wedded, Hugh.

HUGH. When I arose this morning I went to her
To tell her, but she slept ; and when I set
Her breakfast on the table by the bed
I would have waked her, and stretched out my hand
To rouse her, and the words were on my lips ;
And yet I didn't touch her, spoke no word :
I was afraid to speak, I don't know why :
'Twas folly, lass, and yet I could not speak.

ESTHER. You should have told her.

HUGH.

Well, it doesn't matter,

For we are wedded, Esther. I'm no boy
That I must ever ask my mother's leave
Ere I do aught. I left her sleeping still,
And when she waked she'd think me with the sheep,
And sup her meal in peace, and little know
Into what fold I'd wandered and with whom.

ESTHER. You should have told her, Hugh : she will be wroth
To wake and find you wed. If you were frightened
To tell her then, how will you tell her now ?

HUGH. 'Twas not her wrath I feared. I scarce know why
I did not tell her, for I would have wed
Though she had bidden me " Nay " a thousand times.
Lass, do you think a word would hold me back
Like a cowed collie when I would be forth ?

Not all the world could keep me from you, lass,
Once I had set my heart on you. Do you think
I should have taken "Nay," lass, even from you?

ESTHER. Ay, you are masterful and had your way
To church ere scarce I knew it; and yet, Hugh,
You'd not have had your way so easily
Had it not been my way as well.

HUGH. Ay, lass,
Naught could have held us from each other—naught,
And naught shall ever part us.

ESTHER (*glancing towards the bed*). Hugh, she stirs :
Your voice has wakened her.

ANN (*from the bed*). Hugh, are you there ?

HUGH (*going towards the bed*).
Ay, mother.

ANN. Lad, what hour is it ?

HUGH. Nigh noon.

ANN. I did not waken till you'd gone this morning :
I must have slumbered soundly, though I'd slept
But little in the night. I could not sleep :
I lay awake and watched the dark hours pass :
They seemed to trail as slowly as the years
On which I brooded and did naught but brood,
Though my eyes burned for slumber—those dark years
So long since passed ! I did not sleep till dawn,
And then I dreamt again of those dark years,
And in my dream they seemed to threaten you :
And when I waked the clock was striking nine,
And you were gone. I must have slept again—
For you are here. I didn't hear the latch.

HUGH. Mother, I spoke to you the other evening
Of Esther, but you did not heed . . .

ANN. My dream !
Hugh, lad, I heard your words with fearful heart,
Yet could not speak. Son, you must never wed.

HUGH. What say you, mother ! Am I yet a boy—
A pup to bring to heel with "must" and "shall" ?
Mother, this cur's beyond your call.

ANN. Nay, lad,
I don't bid you for bidding's sake, nor yet
Because I dread another mistress here.
Hugh, son, my mother's heart would have you wed,

Yet this same heart cries out to hinder you.
Believe me, for your happiness I speak.
You must not wed.

HUGH. Hush, mother ! Don't speak now.

(*He motions to ESTHER, who comes forward to the bed.*)

ANN (*turning towards ESTHER*).

Is some one there ? You should have told me, Hugh.
Who is it, lad—for my old eyes are weak
And the light dazzles them ? I know the face.
Is't Esther Ord ?

HUGH. No, Esther Shield, my bride.

ANN (*after a pause*). Then it's too late ! Had I but spoken
then,

Or held my tongue for ever !

HUGH. That were best.

Don't heed her, lass : she doesn't know what she says.

ANN. Would that I didn't know, had never known !
O son, it's you who do not know ! But now
It is too late, too late. How could I think
You'd wed and never let on or breathe a word ?
And yet I might have known, I might have known :
You have your father's will.

HUGH. Ay, mother, words
Are naught to me but words, and all your words
Would never stay me when my heart is set.
If 'twas my father's way, I am his son.

ANN. You are his son. Would, lad, that you were not !

HUGH. Mother !

ANN. You're right, son ; I will say no more.
I should have spoken then or not at all.
It's now too late to speak.

ESTHER. It's not too late.

HUGH (*slowly*). Esther says truly : it's not yet too late.
You shall speak on now ; it's too late to leave
Your thought unspoken, mother : you have said
Too much, too little, to keep silence now.
The gate's unbarred ; you cannot stay the flock

ANN. Have I not kept my counsel all these years ?
Nay, I'll not speak now ; it's too late, too late.

(*Turning to ESTHER.*)

Esther, my lass, I would you had not heard :
I wish you well, though you may doubt it now,

I wish you well with all my heart. Come nigh
That I may kiss you.

ESTHER (*without stirring*). It is not too late.
If you have any mercy in your heart,
Speak out your mind as though I were not here.

HUGH. Ay, you shall speak out now.

ANN.

Then I will speak :

Happen it's not too late : I will speak out
As I would one had spoken out to me
Upon my bridal-morn. If my words seem
Too fierce, too bitter, it's because they spring
From a fierce, bitter heart. O Esther, lass,
'Twere better you should die than your young heart
Grow old and fierce and bitter—better far
That it should break and you should die than live
To grow old in black bitterness and wrath
As I have done. I have not much life left,
But I would save you, lass, with my last breath,
If any word can fend off destiny.
And Hugh, my son, though I speak bitter things
To your unhappiness, I only seek
To snatch you from disaster. You have said
That words are weak, yet I have nothing else.
You will not hate a poor old woman, Hugh,
Because she snatches at a wisp of straw
To save the son who drowns before her eyes ?
I must speak out the bitter galling truth,
Though you should hate me, son, for evermore.

HUGH. Say on : I shall not hate you : speak out all,
If it will ease you.

ANN. Naught can bring me ease
Save death, and death bides long : yet I will speak.
You did not know your father, Hugh : he died
When you were in the cradle. You have heard
How on a hurdle he was brought home dead
From Thirlwall Crag, for folk have told you this,
Though I have never breathed his name to you.
They wondered how he fell. He didn't fall.
And when I never spoke of him they thought
That I was dumb with sorrow. It was hate
That held me mute. How should I mourn him dead
Whom I had hated living ! Don't speak, Hugh,

Till I have told you all : then you shall judge.
I scarce have breath to tell the tale, and yet
'Twill soon be told ; and if you hate me, son,
As I did hate your father, I don't fear,
For I am too nigh death, and soon shall lie
Unmindful of your hate as he of mine.
I could not hate you, son, although you bear
His name and though his blood runs in your veins.
When first I knew him he was much like you—
As tall and broad and comely, and his eyes
The same fierce blue, his hair the same dull red.
Ay, you are like your father to the hands—
Your big brown cruel hands !—you have his grip :
And he was just about your age and lived
Here with his father, a fierce, silent man—
Mad Hugh the neighbours called him—whose wife died
Ere she could weary of her wedding-gown.
Folk said that fear had killed her : yet when Hugh,
Your father, wooed, I could not say him nay,
Though he was like his father. I was young,
And loved him for his very fierceness—proud
Because he was so big and strong, and yet
I always feared him ; and, poor trembling fool,
'Twas fear that drove me to him ; and we wed
When old Hugh died. The day he brought me home—
Home to this selfsame house, I shrank from him
Because I feared him, and he saw my fear.
I feared the passion in his wild blue eyes
And loathed his fiery love, so nigh to hate :
But I was his, and there was none to speak,
As now I speak, or, on that very morning
I should have left him. Ah, had I but known !
I was so young. A bitter year wore through,
And you were born, son : still I could not die,
Though fear was ever on me, and he knew
I feared him, and for that he hated me.
Have patience, lad ; the tale is wellnigh told.
One day when his hand touched me I shrank back :
He saw, and sudden fury filled his eyes ;
He clutched me by the throat with savage grip
And flung me fiercely from him, and I fell
Against the hearthstone, and knew nothing more

Till, coming to myself again, I found
 That he was gone and all the room was dark.
 The night had fallen and I heard you cry—
 For you were in your cradle, Hugh—and rose,
 Though all my body quivered with keen pain,
 To suckle you. Next morn they brought him in
 Dead on a hurdle. When I swooned and fell
 They thought that grief had killed me ; but even then
 I could not die, and came to life again,
 And wakened on the bed I have not left
 So many years. The folk were good to me ;
 And as they tended you I heard them talk
 And wonder how your father came to fall,
 Yet I spoke naught of him, because I knew
 He hadn't fallen, but had leapt headlong
 To death, afraid his hand had murdered me.
 Ay, panic drove him. . . . You must hear me out.
 Don't speak yet, lad. I have not much to say.
 But you are all your father !

HUGH.

I will speak !

Say, mother, have I ever done you ill ?

ANN. No, son, you ever have been good to me,
 Because I knew you and I didn't fear you.
 Yet you're your father : when you were a baby
 I knew it, for your little fist would smite
 The breast from which it fed with sudden wrath.
 When you were barely weaned, a shepherd brought
 A poor wee motherless lamb for you to tend ;
 And though you loved it with your hot young heart,
 And hugged it nigh to death, and day or night
 Would not be parted from it, yet one morning,
 When it shrank from your fierce caress, your hands
 In sudden fury clutched its throat, and nigh
 Had strangled it, ere it was snatched from you.
 That day I vowed that you should never wed
 If I might stay you : but I speak too late ;
 'Twere as much use to bid the unborn babe
 Beware to breathe the bitter breath of life.

HUGH. It is not yet too late.

(*Turning to ESTHER.*) Lass, you have heard.

(*Going to the door and throwing it open.*)

The door is open ; you are free to go.

Why do you tarry? Are you not afraid?
 Go ere I hate you: I'll not hinder you;
 I would not have you bound to me by fear.
 Don't fear to leave me; rather fear to bide
 With me, who am my father's very son.
 Go, lass, while yet I love you.

ESTHER (*closing the door*). I will bide.
 I have heard all, and yet I would not go,
 Nor would I have a single word unsaid.
 I loved you, husband, yet I did not know you
 Until your mother spoke. I know you now,
 And I am not afraid.

(*Taking off her hat and moving towards the table.*)

Come, take your seat.

THE SCAR

The living-room of The Scar, a shepherd's cottage on the fells.

ABEL FORSTER is seated with his back to the open door, gazing with unseeing eyes into a smouldering peat-fire, the dull glow of which is the only light in the room. The pendulum of the hanging clock is silent and motionless, and the singing of the moorland burn and the intermittent hunting-cry of the owl outside are the only sounds that break the frosty silence of the night. Presently a step is heard on the threshold, and MARGARET FORSTER, ABEL'S wife, enters, wrapped in a shawl which covers the bundle she is carrying in her arms. As she sinks wearily into a chair by the door, ABEL looks up at her uncertainly; then fixes his eyes again on the fire, from which he does not raise them while speaking.

ABEL. So you are back?

MARGARET. Yes, I am back.

ABEL.

I knew

Sooner or later you would come again:
 I have expected you these many nights,
 But thought to see you sooner, lass.

MARGARET.

And yet

You could not know: I did not know myself,
 And even at the door I almost turned.

ABEL. Yet you are here.

MARGARET. Yes, I am here to-night ;
But where the dawn shall find me I don't know.

ABEL. You would not go again ! Lass, do you think
My door shall ever stand ajar for you
To come and go when it may please your whim ?

MARGARET. No ; if I go again I don't come back.

ABEL. You shall not go.

MARGARET. Ah ! you have not learned aught
From the long months that taught so much to me ?

ABEL. Ay, lass, I have learned something. Do not leave me.
You too have learned, you say ; you have come home.
Why go again into the world to starve,
While there is food and shelter for you here ?
But you will bide. We will forget the past.
Let us forgive each other. . . .

MARGARET. I don't come
To crave forgiveness—nor would I forget.

ABEL. Why have you come then ? Were you hunger-driven ?
O lass, I hoped . . .

MARGARET. No, I don't come to beg
Nor would I starve while I have hands to work :
I've lacked nor food nor shelter since I left.

ABEL. Then why have you returned ?

MARGARET. I have come back
Because I am the mother of your son.

*(She rises from her seat and throws back her shawl, revealing
a baby at her breast.)*

ABEL *(looking up)*. My son ! Ah, Margaret ! Now I understand.
To think I didn't know !

MARGARET. The boy was born
A month ago.

ABEL. Your bairn has brought you home.
You will not go again. You have come back
Because you could not quite forget.

MARGARET. I've come
Because the bairn is yours : I would not keep
Your own from you, nor would I rob the child
Of home and father.

ABEL. Had you no other thought ?
Had you forgotten in so brief a while
How we had loved, lass ?

MARGARET. We knew naught of love.

ABEL. Did we not know love when we married ?

MARGARET.

Nay,

We knew nót love : in passion we were wed,
And passion parted us as easily.

ABEL. Ay, passion parted us ; yet surely love
Brings us again together. We were young
And hasty happen when we wed, but lass,
I have awaited these seven weary months
For your return ; and with the sheep by day,
Or brooding every night beside the hearth,
I've pondered long on many things : the months
Have brought me wisdom, and I love. I knew
You would return ; for you too have found love.

MARGARET. Is this your wisdom ? Little you have learned :
You are as hasty as the day we wed.
I too have brooded long on many things :
Happen my wisdom is no more than yours—
Who knows ! but only time will tell. I've lived
And laboured in the city these long months,
And though I found friends even there and folk
Were good to me, and when the boy was born
A neighbour tended me, yet in my heart
The city was a solitude ; I lived
Alone in all that teeming throng of folk.
Yet I was not afraid to be alone,
Nor in my loneliness did I regret
That we had parted, for the solitude
Revealed so much that else I had not learned
Of my own heart to me. But when at length
I knew another life within me stirred
My thoughts turned homeward to the hills—it seemed
So pitiful that a baby should be born
Amid that stifling squalor. As I watched
The little children, starved and pinched and white,
Already old in evil ere their time,
Who swarmed in those foul alleys, and who played
In every gutter of the reeking courts,
I vowed no child of mine should draw its breath
In that dark city, by our waywardness
Robbed of the air and sun—ay, and the hills
And the wide playground of the windy heath :

Margaret, your wisdom is no less than mine,
And mine is love, lass.

MARGARET. Only time will tell.

WINTER DAWN

The living-room of Callersteads, STEPHEN REED'S cottage on the fells. A candle burns on the window-sill, though the light of dawn already glimmers through the snow-blinded panes. ELIZABETH, STEPHEN'S wife, paces the sanded floor with impatient step; MARY, his mother, sits crouched on the settle over the peat-fire; ELIZABETH'S baby sleeps in a cradle by her side.

ELIZABETH. The men are long away.

MARY. Have patience, lass ;

They'll soon be back ; they've scarce been gone an hour.

It's toilsome travelling when the drifts are deep ;

And William is no longer young. Fear naught :

They'll bring back Stephen with them safe and sound.

ELIZABETH. You know he could not live through such a night.

MARY. Nay, none may know but God. I only know

That I have heard my father many times

Tell over and over, as though it were some tale

He'd learned by heart—for he was innocent

And helpless as a baby for many years

Before death took him—how, when he was young,

A hundred sheep were buried in the drifts

Down Devil's Syke, yet not a ewe was lost,

Though five days passed ere they could be dug out,

And they had cropped the grass beneath their feet

Bare to the roots and nibbled at their wool

To stay the pangs of hunger, when at last

The shepherds found them, nearly starved, poor beasts.

If the frost hold, sheep live for many days

Beneath a drift ; the snow lies on them light,

So they can draw their breath and keep them warm ;

But when the thaw comes it is death to them,

For they are smothered 'neath the melting snow.

I've heard my father speak these very words

A thousand times ; and I can see him now

As, huddled in the ingle over the fire
 With crazy eyes and ever-groping hands,
 He sat all day and mumbled to himself.
 If silly sheep can keep themselves alive
 So many days and nights, a shepherd-lad
 With all his wits to strive against the storm
 Would never perish in a day and night ;
 And Stephen is a man . . .

ELIZABETH. If Stephen lived
 He would not bide from home a day and night ;
 He could not lose his way across the fell
 Unless the snow overcame him.

MARY. Yet maybe
 He sheltered under a dyke and fell asleep,
 And William and his man will find him there.

ELIZABETH. Ay, they will find him sleeping sure enough,
 But from that slumber who shall waken him ?

MARY. Nay, lass, you shall not speak so ! Stephen lives.
 The mother's heart within me tells me this—
 That I shall look upon my son again
 Before an hour has passed.

ELIZABETH. A wife's love knows
 Its loss ere it be told, and in my heart
 I know this night has taken him from me.
 My husband's eyes shall never look again
 In mine, nor his lips ever call me wife.
 You cannot love him as I love him. . . .

MARY. Lass !

ELIZABETH. Because he is your son, you love him, woman,
 But I, for love of him, became his bride.

MARY. Lass, don't speak so. Your son cries out to you :
 Take him within your arms and comfort him
 Until his father comes.

ELIZABETH. Poor bairn, poor bairn !
 Your father nevermore will look on you
 And hug you to his breast, and call you his.
 Nay ! Shut your eyes !

(To MARY) O woman, take the boy !
 I cannot bear to look into those eyes,
 So like his father's ! Hark ! did you hear aught ?

MARY. Some one is on the threshold : see who comes.

ELIZABETH. No, no ! I dare not. Give me back the bairn.

And open you the door. Quick, woman, quick !
Surely strange fingers fumble at the latch.

(As she speaks the door slowly opens, and STEPHEN enters wearily, with faltering step, and groping like a blind man. ELIZABETH steps to meet him, but he passes her unseeing, and walks towards the hearth.)

ELIZABETH. Stephen ! *(shrinking as he passes her)*

It isn't him !

MARY.

My son ! My son !

STEPHEN *(speaking slowly and wearily)*.

Ay, mother, are you there ? I cannot see you.
Why have you lit no candle ? Fetch a light :
This darkness hurts my eyes. I scarce could find
The track across the fell. Did you forget
To set the candle on the window-sill ?
Or happen 'twas the snow that hid the flame.
The master kept me late because my task
Was but half-done ; and when I left the school
The snow was deep, and blew into my eyes,
Pricking them like hot needles. I was tired
And hardly could win home, it was so dark ;
Yet that strange darkness burned my eyes like fire
And dazzled them like flame, and still they burn.
But why do you sit lightless ? Fetch a light
That I may see. It must be very late :
I seemed to wander through an endless night,
And I'm sore weary and would go to bed.

MARY. Come, son, sit down. The snow has blinded you.
You will be better soon *(handing him a pot from the hob)*. Come
drink this ale ;

It's hot and will put life in your cold limbs.
Your supper awaits you : you are very late.

(To ELIZABETH)

Lass speak a word to him !

ELIZABETH.

It isn't Stephen !

MARY. Ay, lass, it's Stephen : the snow's bewildered him ;
He dreams he is a little lad again.

But speak you to him ; he will know your voice :
Your word may call his wits to him again.

ELIZABETH. No ! No ! The night has taken him from me :
This isn't he who went out yesterday,
My kiss upon his lips, to seek the sheep

And bring them in to shelter from the storm.
My husband's eyes will never look in mine
Again, nor his lips ever call me wife.
This isn't Stephen !

STEPHEN. Why don't you strike a light ?
The darkness hurts my eyes. Do you not heed ?
I never knew such darkness : it's gey queer
I feel the glow yet cannot see the fire.

MARY. Lass, speak a word !

ELIZABETH. Stephen. . . . He doesn't hear me.

STEPHEN. Who's that you speak with, mother ? Is father back
Already from the mart ? But I forget ;
I must be late ; 'twas dark ere I left school,
So strangely dark ; it scorched my eyes like fire.

MARY. Son, don't you know Elizabeth ?

STEPHEN. The lass
With big brown eyes who sits by me at school ?
Ay, ay, I know her well, but what of her ?

MARY. Do you not know Elizabeth, your wife ?

STEPHEN. Mother, I am too weary for your jest,
And my eyes hurt me. I would go to sleep.
Light me to bed. Why don't you bring a light ?

MARY. Ah, God, that he had slept, to wake no more !

ELIZABETH. What say you, woman ? Have you not your son ?
It's I have lost my husband, and my bairn
Is fatherless.

MARY. No, he may know his bairn.
You take the boy and lay him in his lap :
Happen his child may bring him to himself.
Son, do you not remember the poor wean ?

STEPHEN. My baby brother Philip ? But he died
So long ago : what makes you speak of him ?
Yes, I remember well the day he died,
And how the snow fell when we buried him :
The mare could scarce make headway through the drifts,
And plunged and stumbled, and the cart sank often
Over the axle-tree ; and when at last
We reached the church, the storm closed in again,
And happed the little coffin in white flakes,
Before the clods could cover it. To-night
'Twas such a storm. I must have lost my way—
The night has seemed so long, and I am tired.

It seems, I guided his first baby steps.

Ay, you must lead him ; you are young and strong

And I am old and feeble, and my hand

Would fail him ere he reached the journey's end.

(The baby cries out, and MARY takes him in her arms.)

Poor wean, poor wean ! a bleak dawn breaks for you.

(A sound of footsteps on the threshold.)

The seekers are returning : William comes,

And I must tell him that his son is home.

THE FERRY

The living-room of the ferry-house—a door opening on to the river bank, another to an inner room. It is an evening in early spring, and the ceaseless roar of the river in flood sounds through the room. JOHN TODD, an old ferryman, seated at a cobbler's bench, works by candle-light. JANE, his daughter-in-law, coming from the inner room, takes a chair to the fire-side and sits down with her knitting. The outer door opens and ROBERT, her husband, enters.

ROBERT. The river's in full spate.

JANE.

Ay, how it roars !

JOHN *(looking up from his work)*.

The snow has melted on the fells.

JANE.

That wind

Will puff the candle out. Lad, shut the door.

JOHN. It's fresh and smells of spring. 'Twas such a night . . .

ROBERT. Wife, I'll away down to the Traveller's Rest.

JANE. Well, don't be late.

JOHN.

But what about the boat ?

ROBERT. The boat is safe enough ; I've made her fast.

JOHN. Ay, lad, but what if any one should hail,

And you not here to answer to their call ?

I cannot take the oars, as you know well.

ROBERT. The devil himself could never cross to-night ;

The water is too big.

[Goes out.]

JOHN. 'Twas such a night

That Margaret hailed and did not hail in vain :

I didn't fear the flood.

JANE. You cannot hear
How loud it roars : your ears are dull with age.
You could not cross to-night.

JOHN. If Margaret called—
But she will call no more. (*Bends over his work.*)

JANE. You could not cross.

JOHN. I would that Robert had not gone to-night.

JANE. Why, he's a steady lad ; there's little harm.

JOHN. Ay, lass, and yet I wish he had not gone.

If any one should hail, and he not here !

JANE. No one will hail to-night.

JOHN. 'Twas such a night

That Margaret hailed.

JANE. 'Twas cruel madness then.

JOHN. She knew that I would come.

JANE. More shame to her

That she should call you to nigh-certain death.

JOHN. How can you speak of Robert's mother so !
She knew my arm was strong. She came that night
Home from the city after many years :
She stood upon the bank and called my name,
And I, above the roar of waters, heard,
And took the oars and crossed to her, though twice
The river caught me in its swirl and strove
To sweep me to the dam : but I was strong
And reached the other bank ; and in she stepped
And never seemed to think of fear. Her eyes
Were on me and I rowed her home, though death
Clutched at the boat and sought to drag us down,
For I was young and strong. That May we wed,
And by the next spring-floods the boy was born
And she lay dead—and I, so young and strong !
My strength that brought her through the roaring spate
Could not hold back that silent-ebbing life. (*Bends over his work.*)

JANE. Yes, I have heard the story many times.

(*Silence falls on the room, save for the roar of the river.*)

(*After a while JOHN lifts his head as though listening.*)

JOHN. Hark ! What is that ?

JANE. It's nothing but the flood.

JOHN (*still listening.*)

She calls !

JANE. Who calls ?

JOHN.

Do you hear naught ?

JANE.

Nay, naught :

There's naught to hear—only the river's roar.

(JOHN *bends again over his work and is silent for a while, but often lifts his head as though listening. At last he speaks.*)

JOHN. Can you hear naught, lass ? Some one hails the boat.

JANE. It's but your fancy. How could you hear aught

With your deaf ears, when I can scarcely catch

My needles' click—the river roars so loud !

JOHN. I heard a voice.

JANE.

I tell you it was naught.

No voice could cross that flood : if any called,

The roar would drown their cry. You could not hear :

But no one would be fool enough to call

On such a night as this.

JOHN.

I heard a voice.

I would that Robert had not gone to-night. . . .

JANE. What could he do if he were here ?

JOHN.

I crossed

On such a night.

JANE.

Ay, ay, but Robert's wed.

JOHN (*starting up*). Hark, hark, she calls ! I hear the voice again.JANE (*rising, and laying a hand on his arm*).

Nay, father ! Sit you down : there's no one calls.

Your memory tricks you : it's the river's roar

That rings in your old head and mazes you.

(JOHN *sits down again at his bench*.)

It sounds as though it sought to drag the banks

Along with it and all : you'd almost think

That it was round the house.

(Goes to the door and opens it and looks out.)

How fierce and black

Among the rocks it threshes 'neath the moon !

It makes me shudder though we're high and dry.

(She closes the door.)

JOHN. Did you see no one on the other bank ?

JANE. No one was there to see. Who should there be ?

(JOHN *bends again over his work, then stops and sits gazing into the fire, listening.*)

JOHN (*rising and speaking slowly*).

Lass, some one hails the boat, and I must go,
For Robert is not here.

JANE (*rising too and holding him by the arm, as he turns towards the door*). You go—you go!

What would you do, you poor old crazy man?
'Twould break you like a straw.

JOHN. Yes, I am old—

But Robert is not here.

JANE. If he were here

He could do naught : the flood would crush the boat—
Ay, like an eggshell!

JOHN. Robert should be here.

Hark, hark—the voice again! Lass, I must go.

(*He tries to move towards the door, but JANE takes him by the arms and forces him back into his seat.*)

JANE. You crazed old man! Sit down. What would you do?
You need not hurry to your death : fear not,
'Twill come before you're ready. Sit you down.
You're feeble in my hands as any baby.
What could you do against that raging flood?

JOHN. Yes, I am weak, who once was young and strong.
But Robert should be here.

JANE. I'll fetch him home

If you'll sit quiet till I come again.

(*JOHN sits gazing silently into the fire, then closes his eyes as if asleep.*)

JANE. He's quiet now : the silly fit has passed :
Yet I will go for Robert ; it were best
That he should come. I think I should go crazed
Betwixt the flood and his fond doting talk.
I fear I don't know what : it's that old man
Has filled me with his fancies : but he sleeps
Sound as a baby. I'll go for Robert now
And be back ere he wakes.

(*She throws a shawl over her head and goes out softly, closing the door behind her. JOHN sits for a while with his eyes still shut, then starts up suddenly and stands listening.*)

JOHN. She calls! She calls!

(*He moves to the door and throws it open.*)

I come—I come.

(*Shading his eyes with his hand and gazing into the night.*)

She awaits me on the bank
Beyond the raging waters, in the light.
Margaret, I come !

(He goes out, leaving the door open. The clank of a chain being unloosed is heard, then nothing save the threshing of the waters. Some moments pass : then voices are heard on the threshold.)

ROBERT (*outside*). The door is open, lass :
You should not leave it so.

JANE (*entering*). I shut it close.
Father . . . He isn't here ! He's gone !

ROBERT. Gone where ?

JANE. Robert, the boat—the boat !

[They rush out together.]

ROBERT (*his voice heard above the roar of the waters*).

The boat's gone too !

Quick, to the dam !

JANE (*as they pass the door*). He seemed to sleep so sound.

(The candle gutters out in the draught from the open door, and nothing is heard but the noise of the waters.)

FROM "THE WEB OF LIFE"
(1908)

IN THE FOREST

UNFLINCHING I have borne the brunt of spears—
Yet, under these dark boughs that writhe and twist,
My heart is as a wren's heart when she hears
The litch-owl calling through the evening mist,
And falters cowed, a thing of fluttering fears,
Before some shadow-plumed antagonist.

Quaking I ride, yet know not what I dread :
Naught stirs the boding silence but the sound
Of beechmast crackling 'neath my horse's tread,
Or some last leaf that flutters to the ground ;
And long it seems since, rayless and blood-red,
The sun in seas of night-black boughs was drowned.

Still darkness falls not yet, though wavering gloom
Sweeps through the brake and brims each hollow dank :
Empty of light the stirless pine-trees loom
Against the glistening sky, and grey and lank
The shadows rise as ghosts from out the tomb
And, closing, follow at my horse's flank.

But them I fear not, nor the beasts that lurk
Beneath the cavernous branches crouching low,
Whose famished eyes flame on me through the mirk :
Spell-bound they spring not ; 'neath the cleaver's blow
Their desperate fangs would snatch the blinded stirk,
Yet quail before the doom to which I go—

The unknown death-plumed horror that at last
From its old ambush in the heart of night,
Leagued with long-thwarted perils of the past,
Shall swoop down on me with unswerving flight.
Drink while you may the light that fades so fast,
O eyes that shall not see the morning-light !

BY THE FIRE

THE laughter died upon our lips ; the jest
 Our breath into a feeble flame had fanned,
 A fitful moment flickered and went out ;
 And sudden-swooping silence put to rout
 The vanguard of light words, and hotly pressed
 Our hearts' forlorn defences, though we planned
 With subtle strategies to outwit fate.
 Into the glowing coals, with chin on hand
 And eyes that mirrored the gold flare, you gazed
 Until the cinders blackened in the grate ;
 When, as the last flame guttered out, you raised
 Your head and spoke in wondering distress—
 " Yet—were we never meant for happiness ? "

My soul pealed " Yea ! " to your soul's weary cry,
 Yet my lips moved not, and no word I spake
 Out of my heart's deep bitterness. I know
 Too well the alms the grudging gods bestow
 On them who crave to have before they die
 A little happiness for pity's sake :
 The famished cry for bread ; a blood-red stone
 Is flung them : better far our hearts should break
 Than fawn on gods whose utmost niggard dole
 To them who cringe before the skull-built throne
 Is pleasure's pinchbeck coin that cheats the soul,
 And, all its glitter vanished in a breath,
 But serves to pay the ferry-toll of death.

THE VOYAGERS

SAGELY we talked of others we had known—
 Foolhardy mariners upon life's sea,
 Who spread full-sail before the winds of chance,
 And high of heart awhile rode gallantly
 Over sunlit waters, till their bark was blown
 On some uncharted shoal of circumstance ;
 And, flaunting yet their folly's fatal pride,
 They perished in the stormless morning-tide.

Then we embarked and thrust out from the shore
By grey-haired wisdom piloted ; no sail
We loosed to take the morn's impetuous breath,
Lest we be smitten by some sudden gale,
But, bent above the trusty labouring oar,
From wave to wave between the reefs of death
We kept a careful course beyond the shoals
Whereon had foundered those adventurous souls.

Yet all in vain ; our strength was spent ere noon,
And, even as we reached the open sea,
The steersman's hand dropped listless by the helm ;
And over unknown waters aimlessly
We drift through night beneath a shrouded moon,
Imploring some swift storm to overwhelm
Our weary lives that cower in the dark
Beside the old blind pilot, cold and stark.

THE CROWN

TO-MORROW slowly bears to me the crown
Of all my days and deeds, from fortune wrung
With sword and smile, quick thrust and dallying tongue,
Hates masked with love and terror trampled down.
For not to me by right of ancient wrong
Does easy kingship fall from kingly sires ;
No random throw of chance my life attires
In regal purple, but with labour long
Of desperate day and swift unslumbering night
I smiled and slew and jostled through the years,
Till one by one behind me fell my fears,
And one by one my foes were put to flight.
Now none withstands me, and I feel at last
The sceptre in my grasp, for when day comes,
And dawn is startled by the roll of drums,
My conquest, bruited on the herald's blast,
Shall hail me king through all the cowering lands :
To-morrow—yet to-night I may not sleep,
But like a robber through the guards I creep
Into the chamber where the great throne stands

To await the dawning majesty of day.
 No sound is there, no light, save from the moon
 Falls one dim ray to where at stroke of noon
 My knees shall bend before him who shall lay
 The gold crown on my brow, when I shall rise
 To stoop no more and, throned on mailèd power,
 Shall sway the lands and peoples from that hour,
 Unchallenged and a king in all men's eyes.

Yet dawn delays. Before the throne I kneel
 To await the morrow's crown. . . . But who art thou
 Who settest this cold circle on my brow
 That grips my temples like a vice of steel ?
 Hark, hark ! The drums ! Yet terror chokes my breath ;
 I cannot rise ; my limbs are turned to stone.
 Oh, who art thou that sittest on my throne ?

I am the king whom all men bow to—Death.

THE MIRACLE

THEY stripped her in the market-place
 And set her on the pyre ;
 The happy light of her young face
 Set every heart afire,

And on the cold unkindled wood
 Her body shone, a flame
 So pure and white, the high-priest stood
 Amazed with wondering shame :

The kindling torch quenched in his hand
 He stayed as in a spell,
 When from the heavens a flaming brand
 Upon the faggots fell—

A flaming brand of blinding light,
 And, even as men gazed,
 A glory magical and bright
 Through all the city blazed.

A moment earth like heaven shone ;
Then soaring through the skies
The wonder of white flame was gone
From their astonished eyes :

And stricken blind the high-priest stood
Before the empty pyre,
While beggars stole the uncharred wood
To feed their winter's fire.

KING ORMEL

KING ORMEL in his pride
Sits on his golden throne,
His young queen by his side.
Between four walls of stone
In this dark cell alone
By day and night I bide.
Yet he who sings
Is lord of kings,
For song doth shake the golden throne,
And rend the walls and towers of stone.

King Ormel spake the word
That banned me from the light ;
The young queen trembling heard
As one who dreads the night
When hope has taken flight,
A shadow-startled bird.
Yet he who sings
Is lord of kings,
And song doth shake the golden throne,
And rend the walls and towers of stone.

King Ormel rules the lands
That spread from sea to sea,
And lords from far-off strands
Before him bend the knee ;
He smiles to think that he
Doth hold me in his hands :

But he who sings
 Is lord of kings,
 And song doth shake the golden throne,
 And rend the walls and towers of stone.

King Ormel in his pride
 The years shall overthrow ;
 His name the countries wide
 By this alone shall know—
 That one by him struck low
 Mocked him with song and died :
 For he who sings
 Is lord of kings,
 And song doth shake the golden throne,
 And rend the walls and towers of stone.

SURRENDER

LIKE peat-dark waters are your eyes
 Wherein the flickering memories flow
 And lights and shadows come and go—
 The sorrows, ecstasies and dreams
 That ever throng the living streams—
 And from their deeps drowned passions rise
 To look again on mortal skies,
 Then in a troubled eddy sink :
 Yet I of those dark deeps would drink
 Though death within their shadow lies.

Your brown hair like a winter spate
 Whirls round me on the northern wind ;
 Its tossing tumult strikes me blind
 And dulls the voices of the world
 Within my ears ; about me furled
 It holds me in the nets of fate :
 Down, down I sink beneath the weight
 Of whelming tresses, yet no fear
 Is on me : I no longer hear
 The striving winds of love and hate.

Down, down I sink among the bent
While slow and slower throbs my blood :
I lie as one beneath the flood,
As one beneath the streaming night
That flows untroubled of the light ;
I, who was buffeted and rent
By every gust that came and went,
Forgetful of the winds I lie
And all the storms that racked the sky
Until the springs of time be spent.

THE BELOVED

THE wind, the stars, the mountains and the sea—
With these thy beauty dwells within my heart
From frail and mortal loveliness apart,
Sea-deep, star-bright, hill-steadfast and wind-free :
Yet, though with these thou share eternity,
Not theirs the mortal tenderness of thee.

Though with the wind 'neath sun and moon and stars
On tossing sea, sheer peak and wintry fell
I ever toil and triumph, though the spell
Of wandering water holds me, though hill-scars
I crest, and night-throned Jupiter and Mars
Enthrall me, yet the mortal frailness bars

My soul from their cold immortality ;
For they, aloof from our flame-flickering life,
Its futile passions, short-lived peace and strife,
Unshadowed by death-ridden destiny,
Blind, hopeless, fearless, loveless, passion-free,
Can never feed the heart with sympathy.

But, though thy soul should see the ocean spilled,
The hills dissolve, the shuddering stars burn out
And all the winds with one despairing shout
Perish in some new dawn of dreams fulfilled—
Some new eternity man's soul shall build
With hands by fruitless toil for triumph skilled—

Because the human heart in thee doth know
The hopes and fears that burn and rend my heart,
Because thou livest, breathes and hast part
In every ecstasy of joy or woe,
More art thou to me than all winds that blow
Or seas or stars or mountains peaked with snow.

THE WORD

OF all of the beautiful words that have flashed into flower
From the wonder and passion of man in the dawn of his days,
When he wandered in youth through the unknown beckoning ways
Of a world that for every young heart is created anew
In sunlight and moonlight and starlight and rainfall and dew,
Not one word leapt to my lips in that perilous hour,
For none there is that may tell of the whole of your praise,
No word that may breathe the wonder and passion of you.

Though all of the rapture of love that the ages have stirred
In man's passionate heart and his pride and his glory and power
He has breathed into sound, and a triumphing song-sweet word
Holds living for ever each fugitive sorrow and mirth
That has quickened and kindled the hearts of all lovers on earth,
No word of man's making might tell of the wondering birth
Of my soul as I looked on your sorrowful soul and knew
The passion and pride and wonder and glory of you.

Oh, were but the voice of my soul as the voice of the bird
That sings at the end of the night in the scent and the dew
Of bloom-laden branches and glistening burgeoning sprays,
Or the voice that was light when chaos and darkness heard
And brake into blossom of stars as a field into flower,
The passionate silence about us would quiver to praise,
And a word should be born of the soul of the perishing hour
To sing for ever in all men's hearts of you !

ON CARMEL

LIGHT-HEARTED with glad hours
In that old eastern land
We climbed the Hill of Flowers
Beyond the yellow strand.

From Carmel's blossoming height
We gazed through leagues of sun
To Hermon's snow-peak white
And desolate Lebanon.

Unsounding, foamless, cool
Beneath us lay the sea,
A dreaming jade-rimmed pool
Of lapis lazuli.

In that unshadowed blue
We gazed until it seemed
To drench us through and through
With ecstasies undreamed,

Till, bathed in living day,
Our souls yet thrilled with light
When over the wide bay
Clear-shadowed fell the night,

As on the sea's far rim
Unclassed sank the sun
And Hermon vast and dim,
Loomed over Lebanon.

THE LIFE-LINE

If your soul climbing towards the peak outstrips
My feebler spirit that so vainly toils
To follow where your feet have trod, and slips
And stumbles, and with lagging paces foils
Your aspirations ; if o'er chasm and crag
My spirit stays your eager spirit's speed,

Cut you the cord that binds us ere it drag,
And cast me off, and go your way, nor heed
Though I should perish on the barren slope ;
And turn not, even though my forsaken cry
Should follow you when in my clutch the rope
Slackens : far better is it one should die
Than neither scale the peak. If you attain
The summit and look over the promised land,
It is enough, I have not toiled in vain.

The life-line strains—my soul is in your hand !

THE FORGOTTEN LOVERS

By day I read
Of lovers dead
Whose deathless names
Are living flames
To feed the fire
Of man's desire.
But now that night
Has taken flight,
Within the gloom
Of my dim room
Pale lovers stand,
Hand clasped in hand.
Though in the night
Their eyes are bright,
Because ere death
Had stayed their breath
They plucked the rose
Of love, none knows
Their names, nor when
They moved with men,
Nor if their life
Knew peace or strife.
By time forgot,
Remembered not
By harp or song,
A ghostly throng

From far they come
 With pale lips dumb,
 And towards me turn
 With eyes that yearn
 And seem to say—
*Brief was our day
 Of grief and mirth
 Upon the earth,
 Yet we may live
 If you will give
 Us breath, and wed
 Our raptures dead
 To living song.
 Too long, too long
 Cold death doth hold
 Our tale untold,
 By time unheard.
 Breathe you the word
 That we may rise
 Before men's eyes
 To swell the throng
 Star-crowned of song
 Who move through time
 To starry rhyme,
 And scatter night
 And put to flight
 The hosts of death
 With chanting breath
 Till, time o'ercast,
 We win at last
 Love's sanctuary—
 Eternity !*

SONG

Is there no ending of song ?
 Will time for ever unloosen
 New birds of singing for flight,
 Gold-plumed, broad-pinioned, and strong
 To soar through the heart of the night
 With singing and showering light ?

Is there no ending of mirth ?
Will time for ever unloosen
Fresh founts, clear, bubbling, and bright,
From the drainless youth of the earth
To sprinkle the heart of the night
With laughter and showering light ?

Is there no ending of grief ?
Will time for ever unloosen
Grey buds that wither to white
And fall as the fading leaf
And sigh in the heart of the night,
Or shiver in showering light ?

Yea, mirth and grieving shall end ;
But song upgathering shall mingle
Their perishing beauty and might,
And tears and laughter shall blend
To shatter the heart of the night
With singing and showering light.

WHO SHALL REMEMBER LOVE ?

WHO shall remember love
At the break of day
When the wind blows out to sea
From the circling bay ?
Who shall remember love
At the end of night
When the nested birds of the dark
Have taken flight ?
When white is the path of the foam
And the waves are filled with light,
Who shall remember love ?

AFTER SUNSET

LONG since the sun set in low-brooding storm
Enshrouded in tempestuous grey and gold,
And, as we cower beneath o'erwhelming night
Unlit of any star, the wind blows cold
Upon our brows that glowed so blithe and warm
While yet we looked upon the living light.

Yea, night is on us, blind and blank with fear
For us who dread the pitfalls of the dark,
Who, huddling close, with doubtful hearts await
The ultimate deluge, or the kindling spark
Of some incredible daybreak, and who peer
With hopeless eyes beyond the eastern gate.

Still darkness holds the heavens and eastward night
Broods deepest, yet, as we with groping hands
Touch one another timidly, a sense
Of imminent dawn thrills unknown sea and lands,
And we await the inevitable light
With breathless lips and fingers clasped and tense.

We live through dawns and sunsets ; life is not
One day's triumphal progress : though it seem
That we shall look no more upon the sun,
Yet shall we live to realise our dream,
And see old dawns re-orient—this our lot,
To know no end, no last goal lost or won :

For we are children of eternity
And not of times and seasons ; life and death
Are but as sunrise and sundown ; we live
In the universal destiny, our breath
Infinity, for ever doomed to be
The immortal quickening in the fugitive.

DAILY BREAD
(1910)

TO
JANE HAY
ST. ABB'S HAVEN,
1908.

PRELUDE

As one, at midnight wakened by the call
Of golden plovers in their seaward flight,
Who lies and listens as the clear notes fall
Through tingling quiet of the frosty night,
Who lies and listens as the wild notes fail,
And then, in fancy following the flock,
Fares over slumbering hill and dreaming dale,
Until he hears the surf on reef and rock
Break thundering, and all sense of self is drowned
Within the mightier music of the deep,
And he no more recalls the piping sound
That startled him from dull undreaming sleep—
So I, first waking from oblivion, heard,
With heart that kindled to the call of song,
The voice of young life fluting like a bird,
And echoed that wild piping till, ere long,
Lured onward by that happy singing-flight,
I caught the stormy summons of the sea
Through whose unresting conflict day and night
Surges the dauntless human harmony.

THE HOUSE OF CANDLES

GRIZEL STARK *lies unconscious on the bed in her cottage. Her neighbours, BARBARA WILSON and REBECCA WOOD, stand watching her and whispering together.*

BARBARA. The house was dark, and so I knew at once
Something was wrong.

REBECCA. The house was dark ?

BARBARA.

No glisk

The window showed—the window that had blazed
 Each night for years. I stood a moment dozzened,
 Then crossed the lane and listened on the threshold
 Before I dared to knock, though what I feared
 I couldn't tell. It seemed uncanny to find
 The house pitch-dark—no candles in the window,
 And not a glimmer underneath the door ;
 And when at last I tapped and no one answered,
 I lifted the latch, unbidden, and stepped in.
 The room was dark—so dark and quiet I felt
 As though I'd stumbled into a house of death.
 The grate was black and not a candle lit :
 And you ken how the candles flamed and flared
 Night-long these many years.

REBECCA.

She must have burned

A fortune out in candles.

BARBARA.

When at last

I'd fumbled for a match and struck a light,
 It only served to show the candlesticks
 Burnt empty : nothing I could see of Grizel,
 Before it scorched my fingers and went out,
 Although I felt her presence in the room,
 And feared my hand might touch her in the dark.
 So I just slipped back home to fetch my lamp,
 And in its friendly and familiar light
 I looked about me with a braver heart,
 And quickly found her stretched before the fender.
 At first I thought—She's dead !—and shrank from her,
 For she was ever cold and proud with all—
 I'd never so much as touched her hand before ;
 And as I looked on that lean hand outstretched,
 Wondering if it had done the thing was gossiped
 When first she came, a stranger, it frightened me ;
 And as I watched, I seemed to see the fingers
 Crooking to clutch a baby's throat, and yet
 I couldn't stir nor draw my eyes from them,
 But stood there, chattering, till I realised
 'Twas only in my fancy they had twitched ;
 For still the hand lay limp. I shook myself,
 And, coming to my wits again, took heart ;
 And pity drove out fear ; and bending down

To raise her head, I found that still she breathed.
 I loosed her bodice ; then I fetched my man.
 We lifted her and laid her on the bed :
 It took us all our time, for, though she's slight,
 She was a dead-weight in our hands ; we seemed
 To lift much more than one weak woman's body,
 As though some dreadful burden dragged her down.

REBECCA. God kens what sins are on her ! How you
 dared

To touch her I can't think : 'twas madness surely.

BARBARA. We couldn't leave her lying helpless there :
 And after all she may be innocent.

Bairns die in spite of all that we can do,
 And why, God only knows. My first-born died.

REBECCA. The innocent are not afraid of darkness,
 And they don't need to squander a heifer's price
 On candles in a twelvemonth.

BARBARA. She never stirred
 Upon the bed, and nothing seemed to rouse her ;
 So I sent my man post-haste for Doctor Bell,
 But, even if Joe's the luck to find him in,
 He'll not get here till daybreak, I'm afraid,
 And 'twill be dreadful if she slips away
 Before he comes.

REBECCA. If she's to die, she'll die
 Whether he comes or not. It seems a shame
 A slut like her should have an easy end.

BARBARA. O woman, you're hard ! What would you have ?

REBECCA. Her due—

A hempen necklace and light heels in air,
 A jig and a jerk should be the end of such :
 She'd dance till she dropped, if I'd my way with her.
 A murderess . . .

BARBARA. Nay—you shall not—in this house !
 Nothing was known.

REBECCA. Why, you yourself have said
 These many times—I heard it from your lips . . .

BARBARA. Happen we all have wronged her : she may be
 As innocent of her poor baby's death
 As it . . .

REBECCA. But who can tell even it. . . .

BARBARA. The bairn ?

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REBECCA. A bastard brat as sure as eggs's eggs.
If she's no strumpet, where is her good man ?

BARBARA. He might have died.

REBECCA. And taken the ring with him ?
There's little use for wedding-rings in heaven,
By all accounts, and less in hell, I'd fancy.
A woman's not worth much who comes alone
To a strange village, and sets up a house
Where she within a month is brought to bed,
And cannot name the father of her brat.

BARBARA. Cannot—how do you ken that ? Has she ever
Told anything to you that you . . .

REBECCA. To me ?
Not she, the mim-mouthed madam ! She was close ;
A sneaky, secret, tight-lipped way with her
Had Mistress Mum, but I could take her measure.
It's not to keep their teeth from dropping out
Folk prim their mouths and perk their chins in air.
A naked finger and a nameless brat
Tell their own tale to all the countryside.
You ken as well as I no man's been seen
To cross her threshold, by day at all events :
What moths her candles singed of nights, God knows.
The money for that shameless waste of tallow
Was never come by honestly, I'll warrant :
You cannot earn enough by picking stones
Or singling swedes at sevenpence a day
To keep your window blazing like a bar-room.
Had she been all she should, what need for secrets ?
Her very silence proves her guilt : her brat—
Her bastard brat . . .

BARBARA. A baby's still a baby,
Whatever its father and mother . . .

REBECCA. Ay—and yet
She hadn't too much love for it, to throttle . . .

BARBARA. Nay, but you shall not here !

REBECCA. Here ? and why not ?
It's common knowledge : you ken well enough
How all the village whispered when it died
The slut had strangled it.

BARBARA. Still, naught was known.

REBECCA. No fire, no reck. But what's come over you ?

Why, I have heard you blurt the thing right out
With your own tongue in Farmer Thomson's field,
And Grizel hoeing not ten yards away !

BARBARA. But I was young and heedless then, God knows ;
And I've borne bairns of my own since, and I've seen
My first-born die. A lass is ignorant
And hard of heart, till she herself has felt
Her baby's fingers clutching at the breast :
It's bearing children teaches charity.

REBECCA. And who is hard and cruel now ? You twit me
Because I'm childless : yet I thank the Lord
That I'm not such as she whom you befriend :
Though I haven't brought my man a bairn, at least
I've never borne a nameless brat.

BARBARA. Forgive me !
You won't, Rebecca ? It's ever heedless words
Hurt beyond healing. The thought of me will rankle
In your heart because my heart, that bears no spite,
Let slip an idle word beyond recall.
But, though denied so much, you've been spared something—
You haven't stood beside your first-born's grave.

REBECCA (*turning to go*). Your patient stirs : best keep your
charity
For her. "Least said", you ken, "is . . ."

BARBARA. Ay, she wakens.
But you're not going now ?

REBECCA. Why should I stay ?

BARBARA. You surely wouldn't go and leave me now
Alone with her ?

REBECCA. Why not ?

BARBARA. If she should die !

REBECCA. If she's to die, she'll die : you needn't fear ;
She's not the sort to go before her time.

BARBARA. I dare not bide alone.

REBECCA. You dare not—you ?
O the brave mothers ! Must the barren wife
Lose her night's rest to tend two shiftless mothers ?
For she, the helpless wanton on the bed,
And you who stand there dithering at her side
Are mothers both, the pair of you, while I—
I'm but a barren woman, hard of heart.

BARBARA. I never said so.

REBECCA. No, you never said so—
 Not to my face. Do you fancy I don't know
 How mothers talk among themselves and grin?
 We name no names: we'd scorn to mention names:
 We only nod wise heads and nudge and snigger
 When certain folk go by. And, as for her,
 I might have been a window-pane—the way
 She'd stare right through me without seeing me.
 She never said so either, with her tongue.
 But I'll stay to oblige you if you're frightened,
 Though the morn's my washing-day, and such a pile . . .

BARBARA. Go: I don't need you: take your rest and spare
 Your strength to wash your linen. I can manage:
 I, who have brought to birth, can look on death
 Alone if need be: I'm not frightened now.
 Go: shut the door behind you.

REBECCA. Nay, I'll stop.

BARBARA. Bide if you will, but don't come near the bed.

REBECCA. No fear: I wouldn't soil my hands . . .

BARBARA. Your heart
 Is soiled past cleansing. But it's no time now
 For bitter words: she'll die while we are wrangling.

REBECCA. Not she: it rouses her.

BARBARA. She tries to speak.

GRIZEL (*raising herself in bed and gazing about her*). Oh, the
 great light!

BARBARA. The light? It's just my lamp:
 Happen it hurts your eyes. . . .

GRIZEL. No, do not shift it:
 It's not the lamp. . . . The light is in my heart,
 Golden and glowing. The candles have gone out:
 Yet I fear nothing now. But where am I?

BARBARA. You're in your bed in your own house.

GRIZEL. But you—
 How do you come to be here with your lamp?
 I didn't hear the latch.

BARBARA. No, you've been ill.
 I saw the house in darkness, and I feared
 Something was wrong. I knocked and got no answer,
 Though you were in I knew, and so I entered,
 To find you lying senseless by your hearth.

GRIZEL. I must have fallen, then. Yes, I've been ill—

Ay, ill for years, but I am better now,
 And I shall never ail again. You say
 The house was dark, yet it was filled with light—
 The light that quenched the candles and my fears.
 I who have lived in darkness know the light
 As you can never know it. Since he died,
 My little bairn, so many years ago,
 My heart has dwelt in darkness, and though fear
 Lit candle after candle in the night,
 'Twas useless ; for not even the sun at noon
 Could drive away that darkness from my heart—
 My heart so blind and choked with bitterness
 Since my bairn died. . . . Nay, neighbour, don't shrink back !
 These hands have never done a baby hurt.
 I know your thought : I heard those dreadful whispers
 In years gone by, though then I answered nothing :
 I scorned to answer—but oh, if you have felt
 A newborn baby cold against the breast,
 You'll know I speak the truth.

BARBARA.

I know.

GRIZEL.

And yet

You're right to shrink—although my hands are clean.
 Although my hands are clean, I killed the bairn—
 I killed it in my heart before 'twas born :
 Before it breathed I poisoned it with hate—
 My hate of him who had forsaken me.
 Why don't you shrink from me, now all is told ?
 Your eyes are kind and I can talk with you
 As I have talked with no one . . . But who's that—
 There in the shadow ?—though it matters little :
 I've naught to fear from shadows now since I . . .
 And I would have the whole earth see the light
 That floods my heart. When first I left my home
 To hide my shame from friendly eyes, and came
 Into this countryside, thinking to bear
 The pangs and burden of my misery
 More easily among strangers, my heart was black
 Against—but even now why should I utter
 The name that once was all in all to me ?
 And that black month before the boy was born
 I brooded on my bitter wrong, and nursed
 Hate in my bosom till there was no room

For any other feeling in my heart.
Ah, shut your ears if you would hear no more—
For I must speak out all. Your brow is smooth ;
I think you could not hate ; and few have known
Such hate as mine. His child within my womb,
Because it was his child—ay, even it
My hatred would not spare ; and so I prayed
It mightn't see the light of day or draw
A mortal breath, though I myself should perish
To keep the life from it at any cost.
My time came, and I went through all alone.
Nay, spare your pity, neighbour : 'twas my wish :
I kept you all at bay to serve my ends ;
And little I remember of those days,
Save as a nightmare anguish, till I woke
To feel a lifeless baby at my breast
Whose eyes had never opened to the light,
Whose lips had never drawn a mortal breath,
And knew my prayer was answered, though I lived,
Knowing myself a murderer in my heart,
Although my hands were clean. And since that hour
The bairn has haunted me : I've never dared
To be alone in the dark a moment, lest
Those eyes I denied the light of day should burn
Out from the mirk on me. I tried to keep
The night at bay with farthing dips in vain,
Because my own heart still was black with hate—
A hollow darkness where I always heard
The pattering of little feet that followed.
The night was in my heart—my stubborn heart
That couldn't bring itself to quite forgive.
But when I came in from the fields to-day,
Tewed by the sun that beat upon my brain
Till it seemed a bit of battered white-hot metal
On the aching anvil of my neck—too trashed
Almost to lift the latch or cross the door-sill,
I couldn't eat or sup, just having list
To light my candles before I dropped asleep
In the chair beside the hearth. How long I slept
I cannot tell. I wakened with a start,
Quaking with fear as though a hand of ice
Had clutched my breast, to find the room in darkness,

The candles guttered out. So long since I'd dared
 To look on utter night—and now I gazed
 Into my own heart, eaten by hate as hollow
 And black as a blasted tree, fearing to breathe.
 Then very quietly, for the first time
 Since I had been forsaken, the thought of him
 Came into my heart without a breath of hate :
 The icy clutch was loosened from my bosom,
 And pity stole like light into my breast ;
 And, as I wondered whence the glory sprang,
 My little baby stood before me laughing
 With outstretched arms and happy kindling eyes,
 His little body filled with living light :
 And as I stooped to clasp him to my breast
 I fell . . . and knew no more . . . till I saw you there.
 I'm weary and would sleep. . . . You needn't bide. . . .
 You needn't watch with me nor leave your lamp :
 The darkness holds no terrors for me now :
 I've come . . . through night . . . and look on dawn. . . .
 The light . . . the light. . . .
 My son . . . my newborn son. . . .
 Dear heart of laughter !

BARBARA. She cannot last long now : the end is near.
 I doubt the doctor will be here in time.

REBECCA. In time ? What could he do if he were here ?
 She's far enough beyond the need of doctors.

*(A noise of wheels is heard without ; the door opens, and the
 breath of morning sweeps through the room.)*

ON THE ROAD

REUBEN APPLEBY *and his wife, JESSIE, sit under a hedge by the
 highway. REUBEN is munching bread and cheese, while JESSIE
 is feeding the baby with milk from a bottle.*

REUBEN. *Married ?* he says, and looks at me quite sharply—
A boy like you ! And civilly I answered :
Not such a boy, sir : I am nineteen past.
Nineteen ! he says, and laughs right in my face—
And you, a husband with a wife to keep,

*And a family, I suppose?—One baby, sir.—
A baby! and you're just a boy yourself.
What right have lads like you to marry and bring
Into the world a tribe of helpless brats
To starve and beg and steal?* With that he took
His children by the hand and walked away.
I could have chucked his money after him,
But I'd worked for it, and I was fairly famished,
And knew you were hungry, Jessie, and the boy
Must have his milk.

JESSIE. You brought it just in time.
He'd cried himself to sleep, but in my arms
He lay so white and quiet I was scared,
And almost dreaded . . .

REUBEN. You were famished, lass.

JESSIE. Yes, I was done; and I could scarcely hold him,
Though he's so light, poor bairn—so thin and wispy;
But when I laid him down he cried and cried,
And I couldn't bear . . .

REUBEN. Well, he looks happy now:
He's drinking like a fish, the little beggar:
The milk will make him fat and frisky again.
But you eat nothing, Jessie.

JESSIE. I cannot eat.

REUBEN. You cannot?

JESSIE. Not just now.

REUBEN. Jessie, you must:
You'll die of hunger.

JESSIE. I'm not hungry now,
But only weary. Afterwards, perhaps. . . .

REUBEN. What right had I to marry! What right had he—
He with his wife and half-a-dozen bairns,
To talk to me like that? I could have chucked . . .

JESSIE. Don't vex your soul about the likes of him.
How can it matter what he said to you
Now that it's over and the boy is fed?
What can it matter?

REUBEN. His money bought the milk—
The bread and cheese too.

JESSIE. And don't they taste sweet?
You seem to relish them.

REUBEN. They're well enough,

But wouldn't any bait at all taste sweet
After starvation ? And I'd worked for them.

JESSIE. How could it be his money if you'd earned it ?

REUBEN. True, lass : still you eat nothing.

JESSIE. I cannot eat.

REUBEN. It's ill work tramping all the livelong day
With naught but gnawing hunger in the belly,
As we did yesterday ; and then at night
To shelter under a stack and lie and think—
Too cold and tired to sleep—to lie and think
And think and think, and wonder if to-morrow
Would bring us food, envying the very beasts
That they could feed on the hay that bedded us.
I chewed and chewed the trash till my jawbones ached,
But couldn't get it down my swollen gullet—
I'd swallowed too much dust. And still 'twas good
To rest from tramping that heart-breaking turnpike,
Though you were plucky and had trudged so bravely
And never murmured . . .

JESSIE. Yet I could have dropped
If I'd not hoped by pushing on to get
Milk before night for him—and after all !

REUBEN. Poor little beggar, he cried the whole day long :
My sleeve was wet with tears.

JESSIE. 'Twas a hard road.

REUBEN. The road is hard and long the poor must travel.

JESSIE. Ay, and the end ?

REUBEN. Where the end lies who knows ?

(*A pause.*) Wife, he spoke truly : I'd no right to marry—
No right to marry and bring into the world . . .

JESSIE. What's that you're saying—you're wearied of me,
husband ?

REUBEN. Nay, Jessie, you know. . . . Still, 'twas the truth
he spoke.

I never thought of it like this before :
I never should have thought of it at all
If he'd not spoken, I'd not wits enough,
Though a bellyful of hunger makes you think :
But now I see I'd no right to marry and bring
A bairn . . .

JESSIE. And don't you love your baby ?

REUBEN. Love him !

I wouldn't have him starve. I had no right. . . .
 Yet when we married things looked different, lass :
 I earned my weekly wage, enough to live on
 And keep a wife on, and we were so happy
 In our little home together, weren't we, wife ?

JESSIE. Happy, God knows !

REUBEN. And then the baby came,
 And we were happier still for a little while,
 For how could we foresee bad times would follow
 And trade be slack and half the mills close down—
 The two of us thrown out of work together,
 And bundled out of house and home, with naught
 To do but take the road and look for work
 Elsewhere—for work that always seems elsewhere.
 It's a long looking. Nay, but he spoke sense :
 For all his pimples, he'd his head screwed on :
 I had no right. . . .

JESSIE. You're talking foolishness :
 Your head is light with fasting, Reuben, lad :
 An empty belly makes an empty head.
 Leave all such idle talking to the rich ;
 A poor man can't afford to waste his wind ;
 And I've no patience with such stuff and nonsense.
 You and your pimpled parsons !

REUBEN. Nonsense, Jessie ?
 It's nothing but the bitter truth.

JESSIE. The truth ?
 It's just the rumblings of an empty belly.

REUBEN. Isn't it true we're on the road to-day—
 I and my starving wife and bairn ?

JESSIE. Nay, see—
 He's drunk the milk and sleeps so sweetly now.

REUBEN. Ay, but you're ill.

JESSIE. Nay, Reuben, only tired.
 And I'll eat now, lad, if you've left me aught :
 See, how it goes !

REUBEN. And still I had no right. . . .

JESSIE. Not if you didn't love me, lad.

REUBEN. You know, . . .

JESSIE. How can I tell at all ? You talk so strangely
 And mumble you'd no right to marry me.
 Why did you, then ?

REUBEN. Because I couldn't help it,
Because I couldn't do without you, lass,
Because I couldn't live . . . I didn't think . . .
How could I think when I was mad for you !

JESSIE. And yet you say, Reuben, you had no right ?

REUBEN. Right ! What thought I of right or wrong when I . . .
I only thought of you and of my need.
Nay, but I didn't think : I only felt,
And knew I needs must have you at all hazards.

JESSIE. You loved me—then was love not right enough ?
Why talk of rights ? or have you wearied of us—
Your wife and son, and would be rid of us ?
Poor bairn, he does not love us any longer.

REUBEN. Nay, lass, you know. . . .

(PETER NIXON, *an elderly man, gaunt and bent with toil, comes slowly down the road, a stonebreaker's hammer on his shoulder. He glances at REUBEN and JESSIE in passing, hesitates, then turns and comes towards them.*)

PETER. Fine morning, mate and mistress !
Might you be looking for a job, my lad ?
Well, there's a heap of stones to break down yonder :
I was just on the way, but I am old
And happen something of a lazybones ;
But you are young and not afraid of work,
Or I'm an ill judge of a workman's hands :
And when the job's done, lad, there'll be a shilling.
Worse jobs, my son, than breaking stones for bread !
Nay, but there's naught to thank me for at all :
I'm old and only have myself to keep,
And so a shilling's neither here nor there.
But you are young, and you must work for it,
While I sit by and watch you and keep you at it.
I like to watch folk working, other folk—
I always did ; and now I'm old and idle.
Likely I'll doze a bit with one eye open,
And when you think I'm snoozing safe and sound
I'll come down on you like a load of metal.
I'm a born foreman, nethery tongue and all,
Though I've never had the luck till now to set
Another man to do my job—too late,
I doubt, to fatten my old lazybones
Like a real overseer. I'll never be

A prize hog on two legs that's long lost sight
 Of his hind-trotters : I'm a deal too bent
 The other way already, and likelier
 To graze my neb some day upon my toes.
 Some folk bend one way and some folk the other,
 Though all of us lie flat enough at last.
 But, lad, don't fear I'll make you earn your bob :
 You'll have to sweat before that shilling's yours,
 Unless you're proud, too proud to work ? Nay ? Well,
 The heap of metal's just beyond the turning.
 The bonnie bairn ! We had no children, Mistress :
 And what can any old man do with shillings
 With no one but himself to spend them on—
 An idle, good-for-nothing, lone old man ?
(He leads them to the turning of the road.)

THE BETROTHED

*A fishing village on the north-east coast, on the return of the boats
 from the season's fishing in the Irish Channel. DEBORAH
 GREY, an infirm, middle-aged woman, sits by the hearth.
 FRANCES HALL, a young woman, enters without a word and
 sits down with her knitting near the door.*

DEBORAH. Why, Frances—you're not gone to await the boats ?
 What's come to lasses these days passes me.
 When I'd a lad aboard a homing smack
 I was just a cork on the water, couldn't rest
 For days beforehand—bobbing in and out,
 Till the boats were due ; and then I clung to the quay
 Like a limpet all day long, and little recked
 How mother chided, left to red-up the house
 For dad's home-coming. Pernickety she was—
 Would swill the threshold-stone a dozen times :
 That was the way it took her, anxiety ;
 Though in those days I didn't understand
 And wondered she could fuss herself with trifles
 At such a time & fretted to fiddlestrings
 She was for days beforehand that last time
 They brought him home.

FRANCES. Brought ?

DEBORAH. Ay, wrapt in a sailcloth. . . .
But you're as calm . . .

FRANCES. The boats are not in sight yet.

DEBORAH. But they're overdue already, and if you daunder
You'll miss the first glimpse of the sails that brings
Such sweet relief to the over-anxious heart.
How often I've searched and searched the empty skyline,
Staring till I was blinded by the dazzle,
And it seemed his boat would never peak in sight ;
And in the end I looked in vain.

FRANCES. In vain—
I too shall look in vain.

DEBORAH.

What ails you, lass ?
Is this the brave girl's heart ? Though in the end
I looked in vain, good hope was in my heart
Until I knew—ay, even afterwards—
For knowing's not believing ; and hope dies
So hardly, if it ever die at all
Before the sods lie heavy on the heart.
But a woman who gives way to idle fears
May bring about the very thing she dreads.
O lass, cast out that wicked notion lest
It bring his boat in danger. He'll return—
Tell that to your heart till it must needs believe.
Doubt breeds disaster. But away with you !
You should be with the other women folk,
As I'd be if only I could crawl as far.
Your eager eyes should welcome the first speck
That swims in sight and ken it for his sail.

FRANCES. Nay, woman, I'll stay with you. We'll hear the shout
As soon as any boat's in sight.

DEBORAH. My sakes !
Who'd ever fancy you'd a sweetheart, Frances ?
In my young days no wench could keep indoors,
Knowing the boats were due ; but here you sit
So calmly knitting.

FRANCES. And if I don't knit
What can I do ?

DEBORAH. What can . . .

FRANCES. I only knit
Because I dare not think.

DEBORAH. You dare not think ?

FRANCES. But you, you have no mercy. . . . Nay, forgive me :
I didn't mean to hurt you, woman,—yet
If you'd only let me knit in peace !

DEBORAH. In peace ?

True it's not only wool a woman knits
Into a stocking : but you, lass, surely . . .

FRANCES. And now

I cannot even knit. Why should I knit
For him ?

DEBORAH. For Edward ?

FRANCES. Ay, why should I knit,

Knowing I knit in vain ?

DEBORAH. What ails you, lass ?

Do you not love my son ?

FRANCES. Do I not love him ?

Love—woman, love !

DEBORAH. Then why . . .

FRANCES. How can you ask ?

If you have loved . . . but you know naught of love.
Have you no eyes, no heart ? Ah God, I thought
The dullest would have seen—and you, his mother !
And you were young once : but you're young no longer,
And Edward's still a boy to you, his mother.
You cannot realise : you're old . . .

DEBORAH. Too young

To understand my mother then—too old

To understand you, daughter, now !

FRANCES. And yet

You've been young too and loved, you say ?

DEBORAH. God knows,

None ever was truer to love.

FRANCES. Then you should know

The terror and despair.

DEBORAH. At your age, Frances,

Love was all happiness and hope to me.

FRANCES. You haven't loved.

DEBORAH. You don't know what you're saying

Or you'd bite out your tongue before . . . but you

Are as cruel as all young folk.

FRANCES. I didn't mean . . .

DEBORAH. It's what we didn't mean that does the mischief.

I too have known the terror and despair,
But I never looked for trouble till it came ;
I didn't go half-way to meet it.

FRANCES.

Yet

It came ?

DEBORAH. Ay, daughter, sure enough it came,
But not before I'd had some happiness.
My maiden days of love were one long dream
Of happiness ; and you should know no cares.
What can you fear ?

FRANCES.

If I but knew !

DEBORAH.

My sakes !

You're needing something to cut your wisdom-teeth on,
To worry over nothing. Hark, my lass :
When you know more of life you will not spend
Your heart so easily on foolish fancies :
You'll need to save your pluck to keep you going . . .
But time enough for trouble when it comes.
I know, none better, the bitterness life brings,
But nothing's gained by black foreboding, daughter,
And brooding on unknown . . . It's early enough
To order mourning when the corpse is cold.

FRANCES. It's the unknown I fear.

DEBORAH.

Away with you !

Faix ! I've no patience with such foolishness.
Your sweetheart's at this minute on his way,
And strains his eyes to catch the earliest glimpse . . .

(A noise of voices and of running feet without.)

Why do you dawdle, lass ? Away with you !
What wouldn't I give if I could go to meet
My son ; but I've the heart without the legs,
While you've . . .

FRANCES. They're still far off : I cannot go yet.

DEBORAH. You cannot go ? You must. What's taken you ?
Why, what would Edward think if you weren't there,
The first to greet him when he steps ashore ?

FRANCES. Never again I'll greet him.

DEBORAH.

Woman, peace !

I am his mother : could I fail to know
If aught were wrong ? The sea could not keep back
Such knowledge from me for a single hour.
He isn't drowned. . . . May God forgive my tongue

That slipt the word ! Your folly goaded me . . .
 Though surely no word of mine could bring my son
 In peril . . .

(FRANCES *rises and goes out.*)

Yet I too have feared. Last night
 As I lay awake, my thoughts went round and round
 In my head like lobsters in a lobster-pot,
 Clawing and snapping each other in the dark.
 But surely I've reached the end : time cannot hold
 Fresh trouble in store for me. My days began
 In happiness, and though I've come through trouble,
 I have come through, and there'll be happiness
 Again for me before the end. My son
 Is hale and hearty, and comes to wed a lass
 Who loves him : ay, she's true to him—overwrought
 A bit with the waiting, but as true as steel.
 A handy lass, she'll make the best of wives ;
 And I'll live to nurse his child on my old knee.

(*Shouting without.*)

That shout ! The boats are in. It seems to come
 Out of the past. How often my heart's leapt
 With hope, to hear it, and then fallen dead
 When no one came to answer . . .

(*A pause.*)

Dead ? You may set your heel on the throat of hope,
 And still 'twill quiver and gasp for life, and while
 Hope lives the heart lives on in a lingering death.

(*A long pause during which DEBORAH sits brooding over
 the fire.*)

But I'll not dwell on that now. Edward comes :
 My son comes home, and with him comes the hope
 Of all my happiness : for surely life . . .
 How long it takes to get the nets ashore !
 But I hear footsteps coming . . . they stop short :
 Peace has come home to some one's heart. Again
 A clatter of feet . . . but they have passed the door :
 I might have known that wasn't his foot ; and still
 I thought none could have beaten my boy home.
 Surely the nets are out by now and all
 Made trim and shipshape—yet he doesn't come.
 Some one must keep him—some one ? I forget
 I am no longer all in all to him.

Why should he haste with Frances at his side ?
 Two never trod a road as quickly as one.
 I must be patient still . . . but hark, a step—
 A woman's, and alone. She stops, thank God !
 Nay, she comes slowly on. . . . That she may pass !
 She stops . . . only for breath. . . . She will go by.
 Perhaps, poor soul, her sweetheart has been drowned—
 Her sweetheart or her husband or her son !
 I wonder who . . . She lingers still . . . I hear
 No sound. Could I but rise ! She stirs at last.
 Ah God, she's drawing nearer. . . . Her foot is on
 The threshold.

(FRANCES *enters slowly and sinks wearily into a chair without speaking.*)

DEBORAH. You come alone ?

FRANCES. I come alone.

DEBORAH. The boats are in ?

FRANCES. The boats are in.

DEBORAH. All in ?

Say, lass, one hasn't reached the harbour yet.

Have mercy !

FRANCES. All are in.

DEBORAH. No boat is missing ?

FRANCES. *The Family's Pride* has foundered with all hands.

DEBORAH. God help poor Martha ! But that's not his boat.

He wasn't on her, lass, when she went down ?

Speak, woman !

FRANCES. He wasn't on her.

DEBORAH. He's not drowned ?

FRANCES. He isn't drowned.

DEBORAH. Thank God ! You frightened me :

You made me think I'd drowned him with a word—

My son. And yet he stays . . . What keeps him, Frances ?

Are all the nets not landed yet ? And you—

Do you only come before him ? You scared me, woman :

You walked so slowly and you looked—you look !

O woman, tell me he follows you ! Speak ! Speak !

FRANCES. He doesn't follow.

DEBORAH. Oh, you'll drive me crazy :

Have you no heart ? Speak out, and tell me quickly

What keeps my son from me.

His father left me before his bairn saw daylight :
 He went without a word, and I've not set eyes
 On him again, or had a word of him.
 He may be living still for aught I know.

FRANCES. And you—you let me love his son ?

DEBORAH.

His son ?

But Edward was my son as well as his.
 He never saw his father, and could I dream
 He'd follow in his unknown father's footsteps ?
 Happen I've been both blind and foolish, lass,
 Because I loved my son. Yes, I was blind,
 And all the blinder thinking my eyes had been
 Opened once and for all by Edward's father ;
 And you must blame me for that blindness—not
 For any evil purpose. If I'd foreseen
 I'd have told you all, even though my words estranged
 My only son from me. But time retells
 The tale I've got by heart already—ay,
 To the last bitter word. That he . . . you say
The Family's Pride went down with all her men
 And Martha Irwin is left desolate
 Of all her sons, and yet I envy her :
 Her sons have gone down with their boat . . . but mine . . .
 I would he too had . . . I would . . .

FRANCES.

Nay, woman, hush !

You mustn't say the word.

DEBORAH.

I can't, God help me !

I cannot utter . . . I cannot curse my son.

FRANCES. You mustn't say the word : he may come back ;
 And yet you say his father never came ?

DEBORAH. I've never seen his father's face again.

FRANCES. There's nothing left me but to die . . . and I,
 I loved him. . . .

DEBORAH. Loved . . . Ay, daughter, but it's strange
 That, what means all to us, should mean so little
 To them when once they've had their way with us.
 Yet no love's wasted. You mustn't talk of death,
 Daughter.

FRANCES. What else is left me, woman ?

DEBORAH.

Life.

FRANCES. Life without him ? Ah God, I love him still :
 Life without him would be a living death,

And I would rather lie cold in my grave
If I must die.

DEBORAH. You mustn't die.

FRANCES. I mustn't ?

Who bids me live ? Not you who know . . .

DEBORAH. The bairn.

FRANCES. The bairn ? his bairn ! Far better I should die
Than it be born to misery.

DEBORAH. Even so

I talked before my boy was born, and yet
I lived.

FRANCES. And what has life been worth to you ?

DEBORAH. True I've not found much happiness in life,
And now it seems all that I laboured for,
The happiness I thought within my reach,
Is snatched away from me, and in the end
I find no peace. I've dragged a broken net,
And all's slipped through the rent . . .

FRANCES. Then what's the use . . .

DEBORAH. I've worked—life's work : and I've not flinched
from life,

But looked it in the face. My son was born
In bitterness, and he has gone from me
In bitterness, and yet, meanwhile, I've lived,
And found my life worth living, in spite of all.
The woman's life's no easy one at best :
I'm old and broken before my time, and yet,
Daughter, it's strange how little happiness
It takes to keep us going. When we're young
We think it's the breath of life, but when it fails us
We struggle on, and find ourselves in the struggle ;
And to a woman working for a child
Life cannot be all barren ; and barrenness
Is the only bitterness. It's courage counts,
And there'll be compensations, though it's seldom
The happiness folk reach for that they grasp.
Ay, you must bide your time : you cannot see
The end : and who knows but the happiness
That slips me at the end may yet be yours ?
Who knows ? The bairn may be your bairn and mine—
Not Edward's and his father's. I've not long
To live, but I'd not die now. I still have hope

To nurse my grandchild. Life's denied so much :
 You'll not deny me this ? Have pity on me,
 Old and deserted with not a living soul
 You'll not forsake me, daughter ?

FRANCES.

I'll not leave you.

THE FIRST-BORN

A fisherman's cottage. MIRIAM ELLIOT stands by the open door looking out.

MIRIAM. The boats are in . . . and I . . . I dare not go
 To meet my husband. I'd not have him hear
 The news from other lips than mine, his wife's ;
 And yet how shall I tell him, I, his wife ?
 How shall I say, " Husband, you have no son,
 For I, his mother, I have let him die
 While you were toiling for him on the deep " ?
 Happen somebody'll break the news to him
 Before he . . . Nay ! but he must learn it here,
 Here in his home, and only from my lips,
 Lest he should blench and tremble in the street,
 Or turn on the speaker, blind with rage. I think
 He'll not be fierce with me, though he's passionate,
 And loves the child beyond all else. He knows
 I too love . . . Yet when all's told I'll not dare
 Look in his eyes. He mayn't say much to me,
 But how could I bear to meet his eyes . . . His step—
 He comes !

DAVID (*entering*). Well, wife, I'm home. Have you no word
 Of welcome for your husband coming home ?
 Come, kiss me, wife.

MIRIAM. Nay, not till you know all.

DAVID. Know all ? Then it is true. Wife, I know all.
 (*Kisses her.*)

MIRIAM. Somebody's told . . .

DAVID. I didn't learn it, wife,
 From mortal lips. Before we reached the quay
 My heart already feared, and when I saw
 No face in the throng to welcome me, I knew

The boy was dead . . . that he had died that night—
That night I saw him cradled in the foam.

MIRIAM. You saw him, David ?

DAVID. Yes, I saw him, wife,
Slumbering in the hollow of a wave :
'Twas on a Friday night, a fortnight back.

MIRIAM. The night he died.

DAVID. Yes, wife, I saw him die.

MIRIAM. You saw him die ?

DAVID. 'Twas on the Friday night,
When we put out beneath a cloudy moon
To shoot the nets, as I stood in the bow
Watching the heaving waters, my eyes lit on
A patch of foam that held them dazed, spellbound,
Till it took a baby's form, and all at once
I knew 'twas he, our David, sleeping there ;
And as the moon flashed out I saw more clearly
His dear white dimpling body—one wee arm
Curled on his breast, the other stretched towards me,
Although he seemed to sleep, and on his brow
His hair as ruddy as new-dipped sails—your hair
He had, though his eyes were mine—his hair gleamed brightly,
Unwetted by the waves : and as I looked
My heart went cold, and still I could not draw
My eyes away, till the moon went in, and he slipped
From sight, and I lost him, though I strained and stared
Across the darkening waters for one more glimpse.
And then we reached the fishing-ground and I—
I turned to work, though my heart was sore within me,
My helpless heart that knew too certainly
All wasn't well at home with those I loved.

MIRIAM. That night I watched beside him as he slept,
One little arm curled on his breast, the other
Stretched out to me, his hair drooped over his brow.
He slept . . . but in the end . . .

DAVID.

Ah God, I know !

MIRIAM. Husband !

DAVID. Ay, Miriam, as we hauled the nets,
I saw his body tangled in the mesh,
His little body struggling, frail and white,
Among the silver herring. My heart stood still ;
I couldn't stir or speak and hardly breathed :

But as the nets came in hand over hand,
Tugging and straining at my heart as though
It were the creaking windlass hauling them,
I realised there was nothing in the mesh
But flapping fish ; and as we shook them out
Naught flashed in the moon or tumbled in the hold
Save the live, quivering scramble of silver herring.
“ Gey heavy for a Friday’s catch,” they said :
But I, how should I know . . . how should I know !

MIRIAM. Ah, husband, how he tossed before he died !
He fought so hard—so hard for life, and I—
I could do nothing for him—I, his mother !
David, you know my love for him. My heart
Has wellnigh died with him. You do not blame . . .

DAVID. Nay, wife, for he was taken in the nets
And I, his father, could not set him free.
We could do nothing, Miriam. Once again
I saw him before daybreak, and once more
He nestled in the hollow of a wave,
Foam-white amid the foam, his little hands
Clasped on his breast ; and in my heart I knew
He slumbered, wife, and would not wake again.
The day broke, and I never saw him more.

MIRIAM. He slumbered peacefully : his little hands
Clasped on his breast. I watched with him till dawn.

DAVID. And my heart watched with you.

MIRIAM. And we are left
Without him.

DAVID. We are left together, wife,
We two.

MIRIAM. We two—and we three were so happy
Together, husband ! Oh, why should he leave us ?
For he was always happy, till the end.

DAVID. Yes, he was always happy, his little life
Was full of happiness. Maybe it’s best
He hasn’t lived to look, as all must look,
Sooner or later, on unhappiness.
He brought so much, and though he’s gone so soon
He hasn’t taken all away with him :
We still have memories.

MIRIAM. Memory is bitter.
O David, I—I cannot bear . . .

DAVID. Don't, wife . . .
 I know . . . it takes me all my time . . . And yet
 Can thought of him be anything but sweet ?
 Do you remember, wife, when he was born
 Two years ago, how I was out at sea ?
 My anxious heart was filled with fear for you
 And hankered to be home. The wind and tide
 Were dead against us, but my will was strong ;
 And when at last I saw our chosen signal,
 A snow-white kerchief by the chimney-stack,
 Waving me welcome with the news that you
 Were safely through, wife, and a son was born,
 My heart leapt like a fish—and mad for home,
 Crazy to run the boat against all hazards,
 Though other signals warned us from the shore.
 What did I care ! My mates were daft with fear,
 And cried out we'd be dashed on the Devil's Tooth,
 But more they feared my eyes—my eyes that saw
 Your signal fluttering welcome ; and we rode in
 Against the odds of wind and wave ; and folk
 Ran down to greet us as though snatched from death . . .
 Though I didn't heed them as I leapt ashore,
 And ran to you who'd come through peril too,
 And won safe into harbour. Then I saw
 Our little son, who snuggled to your breast,
 And nestled in my heart.

MIRIAM. My bosom yearns
 For him . . . Your heart will evermore be empty.

DAVID. Nay, Miriam, wife, will not your heart and mine
 Be full of love of him ? Memories of him
 Will nestle in our hearts for evermore :
 And we have still each other.

MIRIAM. And our son.

THE FAMILY'S PRIDE

The living-room of the Irwins' cottage. MARTHA IRWIN sits in a chair by the hearth. KATHERINE IRWIN, her daughter, and EMMA PRUDDAH, a neighbour, stand near the door talking in low voices.

KATHERINE. She hasn't stirred nor spoken all night long,
Though I've not left her a moment.

EMMA. I couldn't sleep
For thinking of her face—nay, not a wink.
My man still slumbers, lying like a log ;
And it's so many nights since he has stretched
His body on a bed, I wouldn't rouse him.
There's little rest for any man at sea,
Cramped in a narrow bunk between the watches—
I can't tell how they manage : but he's slept sound,
And it was good to have him sleeping there,
After the wakeful nights I've lain alone.
It's weary work awaiting your man's return,
But when he comes again . . .

KATHERINE. She hasn't stirred
Nor spoken since, nor lifted up her eyes
The livelong night, and I can't rouse her now ;
And not a morsel, bite or sup, has passed
Her lips since yesterday. Agnes, John's wife,
And Michael's lass have been —and they distraught
Themselves, poor creatures—but nothing rouses her.
She's hardly breathed since I broke the news to her,
And told her her sons were drowned. She stayed at home
When I went to meet the boats, saying wives and maids
Should be the first to greet the men.

EMMA. Thank goodness
She didn't go, poor woman !

KATHERINE. When first I heard
The tidings I was stunned, and stood a moment
Dumbfounded ; then, remembering, shook myself
And ran straight home to her, lest she should hear
Of her son's death from any stranger's lips.
She stood on the threshold-stone, awaiting them,
A smile of welcome on her face ; but when
She saw me come alone, she caught her breath
And looked into my eyes, and quietly asked,
Before I could utter a word : “ And has the sea
Kept all ? ” And I could only answer “ All.”
She asked no more, but, turning on her heel,
She went indoors and sat down by the hearth. . . .
She hasn't stirred nor spoken since to me,
Though once I heard her mutter to herself

a moment, then takes it to her bosom, looking up at AGNES.)

MARTHA. Yes, daughter, I'll tend the boy while you go down To meet your husband. Agnes, lass, away !
What are you stopping for ? The bairn's all right.
I should know how to manage boys by this.
The boats will soon be in : you'll be the first
To greet my son, your husband—for he's yours
As well as mine now : I've to share with you.
The boats will soon be in, and I shall look
On my sons again . . . five sons I have, five sons . . .
John, William, Michael, Mark, and little Pete :
But even Peter is not little now ;
He's a grown man though he's my youngest son.
And still it seems such a little while—and yet
So long—since I held my first-born in my arms
As now . . . I hold his son. But, lass, away
To greet . . . your husband . . . and . . . my son.

AGNES.

O God

Have pity !

EMMA. She doesn't know what she says : her grief
Has been too much for her old heart.

MARTHA.

Away—

Away . . . You'll be too late . . . But Katherine, daughter,
You stay with me . . . I think . . . I've suddenly
Grown old ; and I'd have you with me . . . till they come.

EMMA. Look to the bairn ! She doesn't know . . . 'Twill fall.

AGNES. Nay, but I have it safe.

KATHERINE.

Mother !

EMMA.

The end

Is not far off.

KATHERINE. Come, mother, lay your head
Here on my bosom.

MARTHA. Ah, daughter, is that you ?

Yes, I am weary and would rest awhile. . . .

It's been a long day . . . waiting . . . and it's dark. . . .

I wish the boats had won in before darkening. . . .

I hope they'll come before the supper's cold.

And you have set five plates . . . and not forgotten

The boy's knife . . . Peter's knife ? The boats will soon

Be in . . . and I shall look on my five sons

Once more before I die . . . for I'm near death,

Katherine, it seems . . . But hark . . . they come . . . they come,
 Their feet are on the threshold . . . Katherine, quick !
 Fling the door wide . . . that I may look . . . on them—
 My sons . . . my sons . . . Oh !

KATHERINE.

Death has pitied her.

THE GARRET

A garret in the slums, furnished only with a bed. It is after midnight, but ADAH ROBSON, with her hat and coat on, and an old carpet bag by her side, sits on an empty box by the window in the light reflected from a lamp in the court below. Presently a step is heard on the stairs : the door opens and ISAAC OXLEY enters wearily. He starts in amazement at seeing ADAH.

ISAAC. You, Adah, here !

ADAH.

Yes, lad, I've come.

ISAAC.

You've come ?

But how've you come ?

ADAH.

Most of the way I walked,
 And took the train when I could tramp no farther.

ISAAC. A weary way for you to travel alone.

But how the wonder did you ever find me,
 When you'd never been before in a bigger town
 Than Morton, with its one street ?

ADAH.

I'd brought the letter
 You wrote so long ago ; and folk were good,
 And when I got bewildered by the turnings,
 And fair bamboozled by the scurry and racket,
 They put me on my way ; though most I asked
 Were terrible ignorant—hadn't even heard
 Of Barker's Close ; but all of them were kind
 And did their best . . .

ISAAC.

How long have you been here ?

ADAH. Hard on three hours.

ISAAC.

So long ?

ADAH.

I could have cried,
 I was so trashed and tired ; and my best boots
 Have nippy toes, for all they look so smart,
 And so they took it out of me, they did,

As though I hadn't paid for them ! But they're
Real natty boots. And then, when I got here
At last, to find you out !

ISAAC. I'm sorry, lass.

If I'd but known—but how could I have dreamt . . .
I took you for a ghost when first I saw you.

ADAH. A ghost ? I wasn't feeling like a ghost
When I got here, unless it's corns that make
Ghosts groan. I had to sit down right away
And have those jimmy boots off, whether or no
I'd found you, Isaac. I was glad to rest.
The neighbours couldn't tell me where you were,
But reckoned you'd be home by night.

ISAAC. Home, lass !

It's a mercy you won safely through the streets.
Were you not frightened ?

ADAH. I was sore bewildered,

But not afraid. The folk were kind.

ISAAC. Ay, folk

Are kind enough as far as words go, lass,
And always willing to squander breath on strangers :
For city folk are not like hill folk, Adah.
But why did you leave home ?

ADAH. To come to you . . .

But you're not pleased to see me.

ISAAC. Lass, you know . . .

But . . .

ADAH. Mother died last week—last Monday night :
She went off terribly sudden at the end.
I'd just been telling her Sally Pigg's new hat
Had red and yellow roses, and must have cost
A pretty penny. "Trust them Piggs," she said,
"To squander their last farthing on fine feathers."
"Roses, not feathers," I was saying, when she
Sat up and gave a gasp, and she was gone
Before I reached the bedside ; and I was left
With no one else to turn to : and when you went
Hard on a year ago to look for work,
You said you'd come again for me some day.
I waited for you, but you never came :
And when my mother died I had no home—
Gey queer to find your home gone in a night,

To waken in the bed you've always slept in
 And realise you'll lie in it no more—
 And so I thought . . . But happen I did wrong
 To come to you like this : yet you—you said . . .
 And still you didn't come, and only wrote
 One letter to me, lad, in all that time.
 Why did you never come for me ? You said
 You'd come . . .

ISAAC. When I had found a home for you :
 But I have found no home.

ADAH. Yet this . . .

ISAAC. This garret ?
 This is no home for you.

ADAH. It's bare enough,
 But we soon . . .

ISAAC. We soon—nay, you must not stay here.
 You must go back again . . .

ADAH. Go back !

ISAAC. Go home.

ADAH. I have no home. I thought . . . but I did wrong
 To come. Forgive me, lad : I was so dazed,
 I didn't know where to turn . . . I've no one else . . .
 But I did wrong . . .

ISAAC. There's nothing to forgive :
 But you can never live here in this hell,
 And I—how could I bear to see you starve ?

ADAH. To see me starve ? Why should I starve ? I'm strong,
 And I can work : I've always earned my bread.

ISAAC. When I came first to the city I was strong
 And could work, and yet . . .

ADAH. Oh, but you're thin and worn—
 Lean as a scarecrow and so pinched and peaked.
 When you stood in the shadow I didn't see,
 But, now the light falls on you, you look famished,
 As lank and bloodless as a daddy-long-legs.
 Are you not working, Isaac ? Are you ill—
 Too ill to work ?

ISAAC. Nay, Adah, I'm not ill,
 Save for the want of work.

ADAH. A man like you
 Who used to work . . .

ISAAC. Ay, lass, when there was work.

You know I was no lazybones at home,
 But always did my share and something over,
 Till father died, and Stephen went and married ;
 And there was room at home for me no longer,
 And not a cottage in the countryside
 To get for love or money to make a home
 For you and me ; and I was forced to flit—
 To turn my back on all familiar things,
 All I'd grown up with, things that hadn't changed
 Since first I blinked in daylight, to pack my traps
 And leave my friends and neighbours and my home,
 And go out into the world to seek my fortune,
 A stranger among strangers—seek my fortune !

ADAH. Haven't you found . . .

ISAAC. My fortune ? Here's my fortune—
 This empty garret in the mouth of Hell.

ADAH. Yet when you left you were so full of hope,
 And said in the city there'd be work enough—
 Ay, and a home for us.

ISAAC. Yes, I was hopeful,
 For I was strong and full of meat in those days,
 And didn't know in cities strong men starve—
 Ay, men and women, in the midst of plenty,
 And wander homeless in a maze of houses.

ADAH. But why . . .

ISAAC. Because there is no work for them.
 " If a man toil not, neither shall he eat "—
 Sounds just, it does, when you're in work and full ;
 But when there's not a stroke of work to get,
 And you see many who have never worked,
 Who've never done a hand's-turn in their lives,
 Rich and full-fed and happy, while old men starve
 Because work fails them, things look different somehow.

ADAH. Yet folk seem kind.

ISAAC. Kind ? Ay, you know the sort
 That cannot bear to hear a bunny squeal,
 So looses a poor man's dinner from the snare,
 And goes home, praising God, to eat his own ?
 I've not been seeking charity, but work.
 Life isn't over easy at the best
 For us poor country folk at any time ;
 It's not all beer and skittles, yet at the worst,

ADAH. Yet you seem faint.

ISAAC. Naught ails me but starvation.

You cannot trudge all day without a bite. . . .

ADAH. Oh, but you're famished! and I'm hungry too,
For I've had little since I left. I thought
To find you sooner and . . .

ISAAC. You're hungry, lass?

And I have nothing to offer you, not a crust:

The cupboard is as empty as my pocket:

I haven't earned a penny all day long.

ADAH. But I've some money, Isaac, though not much—
Still, a few shillings: there was little left
When mother died, but while there is a penny
Why should we hunger? I'll go and get some food,
If there's a bite to be had at such an hour.

ISAAC. Ay, always food enough to be had—for money!

ADAH. I'll go then . . .

ISAAC. Nay, lass, but you can't go down
Into that hell at such a time of night.
I'll get the bait.

ADAH. But you're too weak.

ISAAC. Nay, Adah,

I'm strong enough for that. It isn't far.

ADAH. Then take the purse.

ISAAC. Nay, lass, it's safer here.

A shilling's quite enough to buy a feast.

It's long since I've had silver in my hand—

Would God I'd earned it! I hardly like to take

Your money . . .

ADAH. Lad, I'm starved.

ISAAC. I'll not be long.

(He goes out, and is heard hurrying downstairs. ADAH takes off her hat and coat and unpacks her bag, laying her scanty stock of clothes and other belongings out on the bed: then, unfolding a parcel, she takes out a cheap clock, winds it up and sets it on the mantelshelf, where it ticks loudly in the vacant silence. Presently ISAAC returns, carrying a basin of coffee and a chunk of bread which he lays on the box beside ADAH. He then takes a box of matches from his pocket, sticks a candle in an empty bottle which he picks up from a corner of the room, lights it and sets it on the make-shift supper table.)

ADAH. So quickly !

ISAAC. 'Twasn't far : and I hurried back,
Afraid the fog would chill it. Take a sup
While there's some heat in it : 'twill do you good.

ADAH. Nay, Isaac, you drink first : you need it more :
You've fasted longer than I have. Drink it up.

ISAAC. Nay, lass, it's yours.

ADAH. The money worries you ?
Then you can pay it back when you're in work.
I'll not forget to dun you : don't you let
That debt stick in your gullet. Take a sup.

ISAAC. But I—I have no cup. I had to pay
A penny for the bowl, but they'll make good
When I return it. . . .

ADAH. And you'd take it back—
The first thing you have bought to set up house with ?
If you've no cup and saucer, can't we drink
Together from the bowl as man and wife
In their own home ?

ISAAC. As man and wife in their
Own home . . . Nay, Adah, lass, it cannot be :
You shall not starve to death for my sake, honey.
Oh, if you'd seen the faces round the stall—
The hungry faces in the flare of naphtha—
Eyes glaring from the shadows greedily,
And cold blue lips drinking the very steam
Of the coffee with a relish as I passed by.

ADAH. And you had naught for them ?

ISAAC. To one poor girl
I gave a penny of your money, Adah—
A bairn almost, and naught but skin and bone,
And, oh, such eyes ! I little thought I'd come
To see that look in any bairn's eyes—yet
When the body starves, the best of us are weak,
And little blame to such as she . . .

ADAH. Drink, lad.
It's long enough since we two supped together.

ISAAC. A merry meeting this ! But hark, what's that ?
A clock ? Where did it come from ?

ADAH. Don't you know it ?
I brought it with me : it's my very own :
They couldn't keep it back from me ; I'd paid

For it with my own money at Morton Fair :
 I'd set my heart on having a striking clock,
 And saved up every penny I could to buy it.
 It's a grand goer, if you set it back
 An hour and twenty minutes every night,
 And don't forget to wind it. They were sharks,
 But I wouldn't let them snatch my property,
 Though they didn't leave a stick had been my mother's :
 She owed them money, it seems. While you were gone,
 I took it from my bag and wound it up,
 Setting it by a clock that chimed just then—
 A long way off, I fancy, it sounded so faint :
 And it looks bravely on your mantelshelf.
 Things seemed more homelike when I heard it ticking.

ISAAC. Homelike ? Ay, Adah, there's a kind of comfort
 In listening to the ticking of a clock.
 That coffee's made another man of me :
 This garret never seemed like home before—
 Yet since you've come somehow . . . But you must go
 To-morrow.

ADAH. Go, lad, where ?

ISAAC. Nay, I don't know :

I only know if you stop here you'll starve.

ADAH. And if I go ? Why should we starve apart ?
 But we'll not starve, lad, if we stick together :
 We'll win through somehow : though there's none for you,
 There may be work for me ; and better times
 Will come and bring us work.

ISAAC. And I'm to live
 On you ?

ADAH. No need to worrit about that :
 Once you've found work, I'll never do a hand's-turn :
 And you'll be working soon.

ISAAC. I've trudged the streets
 All day. . . .

ADAH. But that day's gone and done with, lad :
 And hasn't even it brought something to you ?

ISAAC. Ay, though it's been a black and bitter day,
 The ending's brave, if there were no to-morrow.

ADAH. We don't know what to-morrow brings.

ISAAC. To-morrow !

O Adah, haven't I said to myself each night,

To-morrow will bring work, and yet to-morrow
Comes ever empty-handed.

ADAH. Nay, surely, lad,
Yesterday morning when you woke your garret
Was bare save for the bed and that old box ;
But now, lad, haven't you a clock and bowl
To start housekeeping with ?

ISAAC. And you !

ADAH. If you
Will let me stay ?

ISAAC. If I will let you—let you . . .
O lass, I cannot let you go again,
Though we should starve together.

ADAH. We'll not starve,
But live and work together.

(The clock on the mantelshelf strikes.)

ISAAC. It's a brave clock.

ADAH. What, three already—and to-morrow's here !

ISAAC. Ay, lass, and now at home the village cocks
Will all be stretching their long necks and crowing.

ADAH. Too early yet to borrow a bucket and brush,
I take it, or I'd set about that floor :
It's not seen soap and water since the Flood—
And then not too much soap by the look of it.

THE SHIRT

A room in tenements near the railway. CAROLINE ALDER sits by the fire sewing. ISA GREY is standing near her, gazing at the blaze. The clank and rumble of wagons being shunted sounds loudly on the night air.

CAROLINE. Ay, lass, the shirt's for William sure enough,
And I will not be sorry when it's done,
Though it's the last I'll make for him.

ISA. The last ?

CAROLINE. You'll make the next, I trust. You don't suppose
I'll make for him when he's married ? If you do,
You're much mistaken.

ISA. Nay, but when you said
The last, somehow . . .

CAROLINE. The very last : and well
I mind the first I made, before he was born—
Nigh twenty year ago come Michaelmas.
Just such' another lass as you, I was ;
And as I stitched it by the hearth at night
His father sat and watched me, and we talked
And talked of him—his father always hoped
'Twould be a boy ; and yet before he came
To wear the shirt I'd made for him, his father . . .

ISA. His father never saw him ?

CAROLINE. Nay, he'd not leave
His engine, though the fireman leapt . . . (*a pause*).
But 'twas

A dainty shirt, for I had eyes in those days
And nimble fingers too. You never saw
The like—why, this would make a score of it.
He's grown since then : see what a neck and shoulders—
His father's to an inch. You'll have your work set . . .

ISA. It's big enough : Will's a great hulking chap.

CAROLINE. He's just his father's very spit and image,
And he's his father in more ways than one :
I've never had a wrong word from his lips,
Not once : however things have gone with him,
He always comes in just as he went out.
You're lucky, lass, as I was lucky—though I . . .
And now I've made his shirts for twenty year :
He's aye slept soundly in my handiwork.
At one time I could scarce keep pace with him—
He sprouted up so quickly, and every year
I've had to cut them bigger, until now
He's a man full-grown. And yet somehow to-night
I could almost find it in my heart to wish
I were hemming those wee baby shirts again,
His father sitting by me as I sewed . . .
If only . . . No, I couldn't live life over :
Though I've had happy times with Will, I've paid
A bitter price for them : once is enough.
But you will soon be stitching, lass.

ISA. I wonder !

How clearly we can hear the trains to-night.

CAROLINE. The trains ? Ay, happen there's a touch of
frost,

Though I've always seemed to hear them clearer since
The night his father . . .

ISA. I hate to hear them clanking.

CAROLINE. Ay, lass, but you'll get used to it before
You've lived here many days and nights. It's queer,
But I couldn't sleep at all without it now :
Once when I stayed at Mary's a night or two
I couldn't sleep a wink ; it seemed uncanny,
The quiet, and I missed the clank. You'll soon . . .

ISA. I'll never get used to it : I hate that clanking.
If Will could only leave the shunting . . .

CAROLINE. Ay,
It might be well : coupling is chancy work :
But life's a chancy thing at best, and jobs
Are none so easily come by nowadays.

ISA. Yet if he slipped ?

CAROLINE. There's little fear of him :
He's like his father, steadiness itself :
He's always been surefooted from a boy,
And such a nerve—I've seen him walk the tiles . . .

ISA. And he'll be at it all night long !

CAROLINE. Well, lass,
The lad must take his night-shift with the rest.
It's hard at first to miss your man at night ;
But wives must needs get used to it. My man
Was often away the day and night together,
And it was on the night-shift . . . He'd hardly slept
A wink that week, for he'd been sitting up
With me—the doctor thought I'd scarce pull through :
But he'd to leave me just before the boy
Was born . . . I never looked on him again :
They'd buried him by I was out of bed . . . (*a pause*).
But that was long ago, nigh twenty years ;
And now his son's a man, and soon to marry,
And all his troubles before him, as they say,
Eh, daughter ! There, it's very nearly finished—
Only one button now . . .

ISA. I'll sew it on.
I've never done a stitch for him.

CAROLINE. Nay, lass,
It's the last night-shirt I'll be making for him,
And no one else must have a hand in it.

You'll have enough to do, and more than enough,
Before you're married long.

ISA. I wonder !

CAROLINE. Wonder ?

What's wrong with you to-night ? You seem . . . Why, lass,
You're all a-tremble !

ISA. Whisht ! The trains have stopped :
I cannot hear a sound.

CAROLINE. Ay, lass, it's queer . . .
But they'll soon start again. I never knew
Such quiet at this hour.

ISA. I cannot bear . . .
Oh, that they'd all start clanking !

CAROLINE. Come, it's time
You were getting home and into bed, my lass :
You're overwrought to-night.

ISA. I wish I knew . . .
There's not a sound yet . . .

CAROLINE. Nay, lass, hearken !
(*An express thunders by, shaking the house.*)

ISA. Well,
I must be getting home. Good night.

CAROLINE. Good night.
The last stitch done : is't not a brave shirt, lass ?
It's ready for his lordship when he comes.

(*ISA goes out and down the stairs.*)

She's overwrought a bit. About the time
I was to marry . . . It's a big change in life,
Though some girls take it easily enough.
She's not the easy sort . . . It's quiet again . . .
I never knew . . . They must have finished shunting . . .
It's queer . . .

(*She stands listening, as a hurrying step is heard on the stairs, and ISA bursts into the room panting.*)

CAROLINE. What ever's wrong, lass ?

ISA. Will, O Will !

CAROLINE. Speak, woman, speak !

ISA. They're bringing him along :
I met them bringing . . .

CAROLINE. His son too !

(*CAROLINE picks up the shirt which has fallen from her hand.
The two women stand silently waiting, and there is no*

sound in the room until the shunting of wagons starts again, when ISA puts her fingers in her ears and sinks to the ground.)

ISA. Will, O Will !
'Twill never stop . . . I'll always hear . . .

THE MOTHER

Blaeweary, a lonely moorland cottage where ROSE ALLEN, a young widow, lives with her child and ANNIE FEATHERSTONE, an unmarried sister. It is early morning. The child sleeps uneasily on the bed. ANNIE FEATHERSTONE is tending the fire when ROSE ALLEN, dressed as for a holiday, enters from the other room.

ROSE. I'm mortal ashamed to wear this hat again—
It's the third hiring-day it's seen, forby
The wedding. A rose or two would smarten it,
But folk with brats to keep must needs go shabby.

ANNIE. Surely you're not going after all ?

ROSE. Why not ?
The boy is better.

ANNIE. Better ?

ROSE. Anyhow,
You cannot say he's worse than yesterday.

ANNIE. I think he's worse.

ROSE. You think ? You always think
The worst of everything. Don't you remember
Last Monday . . .

ANNIE. I remember much.

ROSE. Ay, then
You'll recollect how often you've cried " wolf " ?
If only you'd had children of your own
You'd know how little it takes to make them sick,
How quickly they pick up, and not be scared
By every baby ailment, and not see
A tragedy in every prick and scratch.
I've never held with coddling brats. He's caught
A chill somehow, but nothing serious.
He sleeps, the lamb, and little ails a bairn
When he can sleep.

ANNIE. But how he tosses, Rose !
That is no healthy slumber, and his hands
So hot, and restless, and just feel his brow—
Fair burning !

ROSE. Tuts ! that's nothing, Annie, nothing !
It's the old story, spinster's children—well,
You know the rest ?

ANNIE. I know the rest.

ROSE. You do ?
Then you should know a mother has worrit enough,
And something else to do than break her heart
Whenever a fractious baby pukes and pules,
Or sit and weep her eyes out at each tumble.
How should we get through life if we took heed
Of every whine and whimper ? But even you
Will learn in time perhaps, and . . .

ANNIE. Even I !

ROSE. Yes, even you : but don't be angry with me
And fancy I don't love my boy. You know
How much I love him, though he's troublesome,
And I never wanted brats—'twas Ralph was set . . .
It's easy for the men ; they've not the fash :
And now I'm left to rear the bairn he wanted.
But I don't grumble, though, as well you know,
I've worked my fingers to the very bone
To keep him since his father died. My life
Is hard enough, God knows ; and must I miss
The little fun that offers ? We never see
A living soul from one year's end to another
In this outby and God-forsaken hole ;
And Hexham hiring's only twice a year :
But you are hard and grudge me even this.
Ah, well, then, I must stay.

ANNIE. Nay, I don't grudge you
A holiday, or roses in your hat.
If I'd my way, child, life would be for you
All holidays and roses.

ROSE. If I'd thought on
To get you to turn the ribbon—but it's too late :
I'll have to wear it as it is this time.
But " child "—you call me " child " ? Then you are cross :
But I'll not quarrel with you. True, I'm young :

I wedded young—and you're a proper old maid,
And never cared for fairs : only twelve months
Between us two—and yet what years and years !
Though I'm a widow and a mother, too,
I am'n't half as old. I wonder if . . .

ANNIE. Nay, but you'll never be as old as I.

ROSE. Never ? How can you know ? Do you foretell . . .
Shall I not live to see the year out, woman ?

ANNIE. Though you should live to see a hundred years out,
You'll still be young.

ROSE. Ah, now I understand.
You frightened me at first with your long face
And solemn words : my very blood ran cold
When you looked at me with those black gipsy eyes :
But you're no fortune-teller : you only mean
My heart is young ; you think me light and thoughtless ?
Yet a girl can hardly go through all I've gone through
And still be thoughtless. Annie, I know life
As you have never known it.

(The clock strikes.)

Is that five ?

I must be off if I'm to catch the train—
It's full three hours' fast walking to the station.
I've stood too long already chattering.
Good-bye !

(She lays a hand on the latch.)

ANNIE. You haven't kissed the boy good-bye.

ROSE. He sleeps so soundly, I'll not waken him.
I'm not so selfish after all, you see :
It's I'm the careful mother, and deny
Myself for his sake, Annie. Poor wee lamb,
I'll fetch him home a fairing he'll like far better
Than all your precious kisses. Now you're cross,
Though I was only funning. You mustn't worrit,
Fretting yourself to fiddlestrings for nothing.
If you knew more, you'd never wake a baby
At any time, but thank your stars it slept.
The nights I've had ! But you know well enough
I doat on the bairn, and wouldn't dream of going
If I wasn't sure I left him in safe hands.
Still, if you mind . . .

ANNIE.

I mind ?

ROSE. Well, lass, good-bye.
I couldn't leave the boy in better hands.

[*Goes out.*]

ANNIE. And she has been through all ! Yet life's not touched
her :

Though a man's spent his whole heart's love on her,
And she has stood beside her husband's death-bed,
And borne his child, she knows no more of life
Than her poor baby ; while I, who've been denied—
I'm old. . . . Life's fed her full while I went hungry :
She's thrown away more than I ever had,
And still she's feather-headed and bright-eyed.
Her marriage brought no tenderness to her
Because she never loved : although she drank
A strong man's love, his very heart's blood, yet
She didn't know what she drank : she drained that draught
As though 'twere water, and forgot the cup
When it was empty and broken at her feet :
And now the bubbling spring of baby love
Is spilt in vain for her. A bairn's a brat,
A trouble, a hindrance clinging to her skirt,
And getting among her feet when she'd be dancing,
And eating up the shillings she would spend
On roses for her hat. And I've gone parched—
Ah, God, have I not thirsted ! But the cup
Passed me untasted. . . . And now I'll never drink.
'Twould not have been wasted on me, his love, if life
Had let him love me as I loved . . . but he,
He was so happy in his love, while I—
I could buy roses for my Sunday hat !
Oh, we learn nothing, nothing : life teaches nothing :
I'm as unchanged as Rose : my heart's still sore :
Experience brings no wisdom to the fool :
I'm bitter and jealous still as I . . . and yet
He never knew of my unhappiness,
For Rose was all the world to him, and I
But Rose's shadow, and he loved the light ;
Though he was always kind to me—kind, kind !
Life gave me kindness, when I starved for love.
She'd bright and taking ways, and I was dour,
And he never guessed her cold at heart—at least
He never let on if he did : his eyes would kindle,

Hearing her footstep, even at the end.
 Nay, nay, he never guessed—thank God for that.
 And she took all for granted, and forgot.
 What wouldn't I have given for the right
 To stand beside him at the last and hold
 His hand in mine, and lay his weary head
 To rest on my bosom? Yet she stood at the bed-foot,
 Dry-eyed, and watched her husband cough his life out;
 And while his body still lay in the house
 Complained she never looked her best in black.
 I burned for him: and still, denied all else,
 Had it been mine to comfort him at the last,
 And spend on him a mother's tenderness,
 I'd have been content, I think. . . . And yet, the waste!
 Wasn't my heart his heart's true mate? But he . . .
 His bairn another bore him, and scarcely seemed
 To realise—his bairn that should have brought
 Into her breast the milk of tenderness
 And understanding to her heart—his bairn,
 And fatherless! But motherhood meant little
 To her—a cold and careless wife, and now
 A careless mother. Labour taught her nothing:
 She rose from her bearing-bed as easily
 As she'd left her husband's death-bed; and 'twas I
 Who bore the pangs to bring his child to birth,
 As on me fell the burden of his death.

THE CHILD. Mammy!

ANNIE. Yes, son. He doesn't seem to know me:
 And amn't I his mother? She only bore
 His body.

THE CHILD. Mammy, a drink!

ANNIE. And she's not here!
 Drink this, my son. You are his son—and mine:
 It's my heart's love has nourished your young life.
 He sleeps again, our child: her eyes he has—
 But when he sleeps she has no part in him;
 Then he is all his father—and all mine.
 He sleeps more quietly; yet I fear . . . So quiet!
 O God, and I, his mother, can do nothing
 Alone, and not a neighbour within reach.
 If she'd not gone . . . But I, what can I do
 Alone? She left him in safe hands, she said—

Safe hands ! I'd gladly cut off my two hands
 For him, as I'd have died to save his father.
 And where could I seek help, if help there be
 For him in this world now ? Hands can't hold back
 What death's a mind to take from us. It seems
 My love is ever useless—a bitterness,
 Hurting me without helping those I love—
 Ralph first, and now his son. He stirs again.
 Nay, I must bide with him. My little son,
 Don't fear ; I'll not forsake you : in the end
 You shall not lack a mother's hand on your brow,
 Or a mother's bosom on which to lay your head.

THE CHILD. Mammy . . . a drink . . . mammy . . .

ANNIE. Your thirst is quenched—

Mine too. Those lips will never lisp again
 That word to other ears. Much have I craved :
 And it's granted me to close your eyes in death.
 My son : now you are ours, all ours—all his
 And mine, our son.

(The day wears slowly through as ANNIE watches by the dead child. In the late afternoon the door opens and ROSE ALLEN enters.)

ROSE. Come, Annie, after all
 I'm the good mother, amn't I ? I've left
 The fair half-over : I couldn't stop somehow,
 For something made me anxious. Your cruel words
 Kept dinning in my ears and spoilt the fun.
 A bitter tongue you've got . . .

ANNIE. I've vented all
 My bitterness.

ROSE. And so I left quite early.
 I got two roses, threepence each they were :
 I like to have a touch of pink about me :
 And I didn't quite forget my pretty boy ;
 I've brought a fairing for him—see, a jumping . . .
 Is he asleep ? He lies so very still—
 So still and white : there's nothing . . .

ANNIE. He sleeps sound.

THE FURNACE

A room in tenements. JOSEPH PRINGLE, a stoker, his head and body swathed in bandages, lies on the bed unconscious and moaning incessantly. ELEANOR PRINGLE, his wife, with her young baby at her breast, stands in the doorway talking to BESSIE PURDHAM, a neighbour. Her other two children, aged three years and two years, stand silent by the bed, gazing wonderingly at their father.

BESSIE. I heard the doctor go, and so I've come
To see if I can be of any use.

ELEANOR. There's nothing more to do.

BESSIE. I thought, perhaps . . .

ELEANOR. There's nothing more . . . the doctor and the nurse
Did all that could be done before they went :
They only left when they could do no good
By staying. They said they'd come again to-night
If he . . . if he . . .

BESSIE. Nay, don't take on so, woman :
Your husband soon will be himself again.

ELEANOR. Himself !

BESSIE. Keep a brave heart.

ELEANOR. The doctor says
There's little hope.

BESSIE. 'Twas strange to bring him here.

ELEANOR. Here—to his home ? Where would you have him
taken ?

They brought him home. . . . Ah God !

BESSIE. The hospital. . . .

ELEANOR. It was too far, the doctor said, too far . . .
'Twasn't worth while to take him such a journey,
When there was little hope for him ; and so
They didn't carry him past his own door
To bear him among strangers, but brought him in
And laid him on the bed. 'Twasn't worth while. . . .

BESSIE. How did it happen ?

ELEANOR. No one seems to know :
They found him on his face at the furnace-door,
The life wellnigh burnt out of him : his head
And breast and hands . . . Oh, it's too terrible
To think of, neighbour !

BESSIE. He must have fainted, then.

ELEANOR. No one will ever know unless he should . . .
But he's not spoken since : he only moans.
The doctor swears he's certain he's not conscious
And cannot feel it much ; he's too far gone,
And mayn't come to himself again. If he
Should never speak !

BESSIE. Gey queer the lad should faint—
He always seemed so strong.

ELEANOR. They say his shovel
Had tumbled in the furnace and the heat
Had crumpled it like paper—almost melted :
And he, himself—he'd only fallen short :
His head and breast and hands. . . . Oh, how he moans !
He hasn't spoken. . . . If he shouldn't speak . . .
If he should not come to himself . . . if he . . .
Ah God, and he so young !

BESSIE. How old's your husband ?

ELEANOR. Just twenty-three come March.

BESSIE. So young ! And you ?

ELEANOR. I'm twenty, turned.

BESSIE. Why, you are only bairns,
The pair of you.

ELEANOR. Yet Jacob is a father,
And I'm a mother . . . a father . . . and his bairns,
What will become of them if he should leave them—
And they just babes ; and winter coming on ?

BESSIE. He may be well by then, and they have you.

ELEANOR. What can I do without him, think you,
woman ?

BESSIE. You can but do your best : none can do more.
If only they'd been boys to make a fend. . . .
But keep a brave heart : surely at the worst
The masters will do something : there'll be money :
You'll not fare badly . . .

ELEANOR. Money . . . woman . . . money !
I want naught with their money. I want my husband :
The children want their father. Money . . . money !
Let them pitch all their money in the furnace
Where he . . . where he . . . I wouldn't touch a farthing—
Not a brass farthing : 'twould burn my fingers. Money—
For him !

BESSIE. You wouldn't have your children starve ?
Money is bread.

ELEANOR. Nay, but I'll work for them :
They shall not want while I can lift a finger.
He loves them, and has slaved so hard for them.
If he can work no more for them, am I
Not strong to work ? He is so fond of them,
And always when he comes home . . . They brought him home,
And he has never spoken—not a word
He has for them ; and he was always cheery,
And picked them up, and dandled them and danced them,
And tossed them to the ceiling. Look, how they wait,
Poor bairns ; they cannot understand at all
Why he should say no word, but only moan. . . .
Ah, how he moans ! If he would only speak. . . .
The last thing I said to him as he went out
Was : " Lad, you talk too much : your tongue's too slack."
For he was chaffing me—" You talk too much,"
I said—and now ! If he should never speak !

BESSIE. He's muttering now.

JACOB. The big red gaping mouth !

ELEANOR. He's wandering !

BESSIE. Ay, he thinks he's at the furnace.

JACOB. I feed and feed and feed it,
And yet it's never full,
But always gaping, gaping,
And licking its red lips.
I feed it with my shovel all night long ;
I shovel without ceasing,
But it just licks the coke in in a twinkling,
And roars and roars for more.
I cannot feed it faster,
And it's angry.
I shovel all night long
Till I can hardly stand ;
The sweat pours out of me,
And then it licks the sweat up with its breath,
And roars more fiercely.
My eyes are coals of fire :
My arms can scarcely lift
Another shovelful. . . .
Oh, how it roars !

It's angry
 Because I cannot feed it faster.
 The red tongue licks the shovel
 As though it would devour it :
 The shovel is red-hot . . .
 It melts . . . it melts . . .
 It's melting in my hands . . .
 I cannot drop it . . .
 My hands are full of molten iron !
 Water . . . Ah God !
 My hands . . . my hands . . .
 Oh !

ELEANOR. And there is nothing I can do for him !
 I am his wife and yet I can do nothing :
 The doctor said there was no more to do :
 They left me naught to do for him.

BESSIE. Nay, lass,
 There's nothing to be done. He's quiet now.
 Happen he'll sleep.

JACOB. The great red eyes—
 They burn me through and through :
 They never sleep,
 But always glower at me :
 They never even blink,
 But stare and stare. . . .
 I cannot look on them a minute longer—
 I cannot face them. . . .
 Still, ah God !
 I cannot shut them out . . .
 They burn right through my eyelids,
 And set my eyes afire. . . .
 My eyelids are red-hot
 And scorch my eyes . . .
 My eyes, my eyes !
 Oh, I would tear them out . . .
 But I—I cannot lift my hands—
 They're full of molten iron. . . .
 My hands !
 Oh !

BESSIE. He seems quite spent: happen the worst is over.

ELEANOR. Oh, would to God . . .

JACOB. The big red gaping mouth . . .
 It gapes
 And licks its lips,
 And roars and roars for food.
 I cannot breathe . . .
 Its hot breath stifles me,
 And tries to suck me in—
 Into that roaring hell.
 It gapes . . . it gapes . . .
 For me !
 I cannot feed it fast enough. . . .
 It's angry
 And roars and roars with hunger.
 Some night the red tongue will shoot out and lick me
 Into that blazing hell-mouth—
 Will lick me to a cinder,
 A handful of white ash.
 It will shoot out . . .
 Ah God, the fiery tongue
 Is all about me now . . .
 It wraps me round and round,
 And licks me in. . . .
 At last the furnace has me—
 The furnace I have feared :
 I burn . . . I burn . . .

ELEANOR. That he should suffer so ! I cannot bear . . .
 Ah God, that he . . .

JACOB. A handful of white ash !

THE ELDEST CHILD. Mother, what is a furnace ?

ELEANOR. My poor bairn,
 That you should hear ! I scarcely knew you listened.
 A furnace is the mouth of . . . nay, my lass,
 A furnace is a big, big fire.

CHILD. A fire ?
 But why is daddy scared ? I'm not afraid
 Of the fire ; I sit quite close and warm my hands.
 I'd love a big, big fire and wouldn't be
 Afraid of it, so why is daddy frightened ?
 I've often sat on his knee quite close and watched
 The pretty dancing flames. If he'd let on
 He was frightened, I'd have held his hand, I would.

ELEANOR. And he will nevermore sit by his hearth,

His bairns on his knee, and listen to their prattle.
He was so proud . . .

BESSIE. He doesn't moan so much,
And hardly moves. I think . . . But hark, he tries
To speak again. His voice is weaker now,
And he can scarcely whisper.

JACOB. O mother, do you see the little flame
Leaping above the bars,
And dancing in and out ?
Look, how he dances, dances—
Dances on the red-hot coals !
Oh, now he's gone—
He must have heard me talking. . . .
But there he is again,
And laughing at me,
And waving his red cap.

BESSIE. The worst is over : he's easier now.

ELEANOR.

His mind

Is wandering back to his old home : he's heard
The bairn, and fancies he's a bairn again.

JACOB. I love to watch the fire :
And when I am a man
I'll mind a furnace, mother,
And feed it all day long
And watch it blaze
And listen to its roaring.
Look, mother, do you see the little flame
Running right down into that deep red hollow,
And waving me to follow after ?
I'd like to follow him
And run right down—
Right down that golden lane
Among the dancing flames,
And dance with them.
Ah, there he is—
And laughing at me,
And waving his red cap . . .
And dancing . . . dancing . . .

(*A pause.*)

CHILD. O mother, look—the fire has gone black out !

BESSIE. He doesn't moan now.

ELEANOR.

He's more easy—

He doesn't stir. . . . How quiet he has grown ! . . .

It's strange he lies so still so suddenly. . . .

If he would speak to me !

BESSIE.

He's easy now :

But he will never stir again, nor speak.

ELEANOR. Jacob, one word !

CHILD.

He isn't frightened now.

MATES

A pit-village. The living-room of CHARLOTTE AYNLEY'S cottage. CHARLOTTE AYNLEY and GRACE HARDY (betrothed to CHARLOTTE'S son, MARTIN) stand by the fire talking together.

CHARLOTTE. Nay, lass, I cannot turn him from his bent :
He pays no heed to me ; he'll have his way,
For all I can urge, though I should talk till doomsday.
He's just his father over.

GRACE.

But have you said . . .

CHARLOTTE. Haven't I said to him all a mother's heart
Can say—a heart left . . . Could I leave a word
Unsaid to save the only son that's spared me—
To save him from the death that overtook
His father and his brothers that night, when I—
I slumbered sound, and never dreamt of danger,
While they, my husband and my sons . . . and Martin,
Though only by a hair's breadth he escaped,
And came to me again—yet he'll not quit
The mine for all my pleading. Happen if you . . .

GRACE. Nay, but I've talked and talked, and couldn't get
A word from him. Will you not try again ?

CHARLOTTE. What is there left to try ? How could I leave
A stone unturned ? Do I not lie awake
The livelong night, thinking of way and means
To keep him from the pit ? I've scarcely slept
Since . . . since that night I slept so sound. . . . It seems
He cannot break with it—the pit that all
His folk have worked so long in. It is said
That Martin's father's grandfather was born

GRACE. I'll speak with him again.
Perhaps . . .

CHARLOTTE. He'll hark to you if he'll pay heed
To any one.

GRACE. O Charlotte, do you think
He cares so much for me ?

CHARLOTTE. Ay, lass, he cares.

GRACE. If I could only . . . yet if he'll not heed
His mother . . .

CHARLOTTE. Seemingly she's lost her hold :
He's long since broken from her apron-strings.
It's your turn now, and you must try your strength
With him. He's stubborn, but he's fond of you ;
And when his heart is set on anything
He's just his father over. When Stephen first
Walked out with me, his mother used to try . . .
But Martin's stirring : I must get his bait :
Ay, even while we talk of him, he's dressing
To go on the night-shift ! Talk !

GRACE. Yes, I must try
My hand. If I could turn . . .

CHARLOTTE. Pray God you may !
There's still a chance though I . . . It's your turn now :
I'm only Martin's mother. When Stephen wooed
I was more to him than any, and you'll be more . . .
Hark how he whistles ! his heart's light enough :
And in another moment he'll be out.
I'll leave you here to speak with him alone.
If he asks, just say I'm fetching coals—coals ! coals !
God knows their cost, though we get them free ! Sometimes
I can hardly bear to see a fire, and think
Of all the burning lives. . . . We get them free,
Or so they tell us, free ! He'll soon be out :
His bait's on the table, though happen I'll be back
Before he leaves.

GRACE. Nay, Charlotte, don't go now.
What can I say to him ? What can I say ?

CHARLOTTE. Your heart will tell you, if you love him, lass.
But here he comes.

*(She picks up the scuttle and shovel and hurries out. MARTIN
AYNSLEY enters from the inner room.)*

MARTIN. Mother, this button . . . Grace !
I heard my mother's voice, but little guessed
Who talked with her or, rather, listened to her :

When her tongue's going no other's got a chance :
 You couldn't slip a knife betwixt her words,
 They throng so quickly on each other's heels.
 Has she gone out ? I wanted her to sew . . .

GRACE. Come, lad, I'll stitch the button on.

MARTIN.

You, Grace ?

Well, you've got nimble fingers : but mother, lass . . .

GRACE. She'll not be long. Come nearer to the window.

Nay, but you must stand quietly or you'll feel
 My needle, Martin.

MARTIN.

Then I'd best be quiet,

For I'll be wanting you often enough—I play
 The very deuce with buttons. You're not afraid
 When you think of all . . .

GRACE.

Nay, I'll not mind the buttons ;

They'll be the least . . .

MARTIN.

The least ?

GRACE.

If wives had naught

To do for men but sew their buttons on,
 They'd thank their stars. But, happen, some one else
 Than I will sew yours on for you.

MARTIN.

Why, Grace,

Who else ?

GRACE. Dear knows ! but, as things go just now,

It seems the chance is you'll go buttonless,
 For any stitch I'll do

MARTIN.

What ails you, lass ?

You surely wouldn't have your husband go . . .

GRACE. My husband ? Nay, I'll tend my man. 'Twas you
 I was speaking of.

MARTIN.

Well, lass, I give it up ;

I cannot make out what you're driving at ;
 But, if you keep your husband's buttons on,
 Then I'll go snug and decent anyway.

GRACE. Lad, don't you be too sure.

MARTIN.

Too sure ? Why, Grace,

But you can't help yourself : I've set my heart
 On you, and mother says I'm stubborn.

GRACE.

Ay—

And if I'm stubborn too ?

MARTIN.

You stubborn, Grace ?

But you don't know me !

GRACE. And are you so sure
You've nothing to learn of me ?

MARTIN. I'm sure you're mine
Beyond all help, my lass : you're true to me.

GRACE. God knows I'm true : but still it's not too late . . .

MARTIN. Come, woman, more than enough of foolishness.
You're stitched to me as firmly as this button
You've just sewn on so strongly.

GRACE. As firmly—yes,
I've sewn it on, but I can snip it off
With much less labour.

MARTIN. Not if I hold the scissors.

(*Snatches them up.*)

Nay, you may tug and tug—your work will stand it ;
'Twill not give way, though you should tug my shirt off ;
Your work's too good : and you are mine as surely.
But, lass, enough of this. If I'd only known
You were here I should—but you and mother seemed
To have enough to talk about without me.

GRACE. We'd much to talk of.

MARTIN. Only half-awake,
I heard her at it with some one ; and I lay
And wondered what the deuce 'twas all about.
You womenfolk must always chatter, chatter :
You've got such restless tongues.

GRACE. Yet it's the men
Who keep them at it.

MARTIN. The men ?

GRACE. Foolhardy men
Who don't care how they wreck the women's peace.

MARTIN. Now I catch on : there's more than buttons—ay !
I little need to ask what kept you clacking :
You've put your heads together, but it's useless :
I cannot leave the pit, though you and mother
Should talk till doomsday : so that's all about it.

GRACE. For my sake, Martin ?

MARTIN. Little I'd not do
For your sake, as you know, lass, but not this.
You wouldn't have me cowardly for your sake ?
How should I face my mates if I forsook them ?
You wouldn't have me go the rest of my days,
A mongrel cur with tail between his legs,

And always slinking round the nearest corner
 Whenever my old mates went by to take
 Their usual shift? Nay, but I'll hold my head up
 A man among the men for your sake—ay,
 For your sake.

GRACE. Who would dare to call you coward—
 And knowing all you'd been through?

MARTIN. Lass, there's one
 Knows all I've been through who would call me coward.

GRACE. Who, Martin?

MARTIN. Can you ask? One Martin Aynsley.

GRACE. Ay, lad . . . and yet if you care naught for me,
 Think of your mother, Martin. You know she's lost
 Her man and all her sons but you, and cannot
 Rest while you're in the pit.

MARTIN. You know I care
 For you and think of her, and yet I'm sure
 Of one thing, though you'll not believe it now—
 If I forsook the pit, the time would come
 You'd both despise me in your hearts.

GRACE. Nay, lad!

MARTIN. As sure as death. I cannot leave the pit:
 My father died, and I must die, a pitman.
 You surely wouldn't have me chuck the work
 I was born and bred to, and throw over my mates,
 The lads I went to school with—lads I've had
 Such games and larks with? Not too many left . . .
 But all there are went through that night with me:
 Before that night, happen I might have left them:
 But now, how could I? Nay, I'll take my chance.

GRACE. Then some one else must sew . . .

MARTIN. Hark!

GRACE. What do you hear?

MARTIN. I thought I heard him whistling.

GRACE. Who?

MARTIN. Nick Dodd:

But that's not him. He always whistles for me
 At Jackson's corner, and we go to work
 Together.

GRACE. Ay, he'd whistle you to death,
 And you—you'd follow him.

MARTIN. Shame on you, lass!

How can you talk like that, when you know well
 That, but for him, I'd be a dead man now ?
 'Twas Nick alone who dragged me from the death
 That overtook my father and my brothers :
 He didn't leave me in the lurch. Shall I
 Forsake him now, lass ? At the first alarm
 He sought me, and together we made back
 Along the main seam in the pitchy dark
 Before the chokedamp, till it gained on us,
 And I was overcome and dropped to die,
 When Nicholas picked me up and carried me
 Half-senseless in his arms—at every step
 Stumbling and staggering over dead and dying—
 Along the stifling galleries, though he,
 Himself, could scarcely struggle against the damp.
 He bore me into safety, and kept the spark
 Of life in me till we were rescued.

GRACE.

Yet

You'd go through that again ?

MARTIN.

With Nick I would,

If need be, Grace.

GRACE.

He's more to you than I ?

MARTIN. Nay, lass, you know !

GRACE.

Yet you'd not leave the pit

For my sake, while you'd go to death for his ?

MARTIN. I'd go to death for Nick's sake, and I'd not be
 A coward even for your sake.

GRACE.

You must choose

Betwixt us.

MARTIN. Grace !

GRACE.

Ay, you must choose, and now.

I cannot lead the life your mother leads,
 Or my own mother's either. You know that night
 My father and brothers were lost with yours, and I,
 Who saw them brought in one by one and laid
 On their beds with faces covered—how could I rest
 At all with that remembrance in my heart,
 While you were in the pit, always afraid
 You too at any moment might be brought . . .
 Or never come to me again at all ?
 How could I live with ears for ever listening
 To hear that awful rumbling underground,

Dreading to see the flames shoot up the shaft ?
How could I sleep . . .

(A shrill whistle sounds.)

He whistles you, your mate—
And who am I to keep you ? Leave me now
For him—and I . . . and I . . .

MARTIN.

Grace !

GRACE.

Martin . . . Nay,

But you must make your choice. He whistles louder :
He's losing patience. Hark ! Nay, you must choose
Between . . .

MARTIN. The choice is made, lass : I choose him—
And you !

[He takes her in his arms, snatches a kiss, and goes out.]

GRACE *(gazing after him)*. The choice is made ? And I . . .
He knows

I cannot break with him. And I must sew . . .

(Calling after him.)

You've gone without your bait, Martin !

[She picks up the basket and can from the table and runs out after him.]

AGATHA STEEL

A room in tenements. It is evening, and ZILLAH PAXTON, an elderly woman, sits by the hearth with folded hands, when the door opens and AGATHA STEEL, her daughter, enters.

ZILLAH. You, Agatha ! You startled me. I heard
The stair creak, but I little dreamt 'twas your foot :
I never looked to see your face again,
Since you and Jim went off so suddenly
Without a word, and only newly wedded.
It seemed we'd heard the last of you. You vanished
Without a word to me, your mother, and not
A line you've written me—a single line
In all these years. I might have been dead and buried
For all you cared : and you say nothing now.
Have you no tongue ? I'm glad to see your face,
Although you look . . . You must be ailing, woman,

To look like that. Have you come back to me
Because you're ailing ?

AGATHA. Nay, I'm well enough.

ZILLAH. Well ! Nay, you're ill. A mother's eye is quick,
And I was always one for noticing :

" The lawyer's cat's not in it with our Zillah—

Prying and pouncing," my father used to say :

He liked his joke, did father, to the last.

But where is Jim ? Is he not with you, daughter ?

AGATHA. I don't know where he is.

ZILLAH. You don't know where ?

Don't say he's left you, Agatha.

AGATHA. Ay, mother,

He's left me for another woman.

ZILLAH. Curse him !

AGATHA. Nay, you've no right to curse him.

ZILLAH. No right to curse

The man who leaves my daughter in the lurch—

His wedded wife ? Have I, your mother . . .

AGATHA. Nay,

For you, my mother, let me wed him.

ZILLAH. Let you ?

What else was there to do ? The thing was past

My mending before I even heard of it.

You made your own bed, woman, and you must lie . . .

AGATHA. You know that isn't true. I married him

For your sake, mother ; you drove me to it, although

You knew I loathed him.

ZILLAH. My sake—and I drove you ?

So I'm to bear the blame of your ill-doing,

Because I tried to do the best for you

And save you from the gutter ?

AGATHA. The best for me—

The best—to make me wed the man I loathed ?

ZILLAH. You didn't always loathe him.

AGATHA. True . . . yet I think

I never really loved him.

ZILLAH. More shame to you.

AGATHA. Still even I would not have married him :

But you, you knew him, and you let me wed him,

Though I was your own daughter, just a bairn—

An ignorant bairn, while you knew everything

And kept the knowledge to yourself which might
Have saved, if only you'd told. Yes, I was young.

ZILLAH. Nay, not so young as simple. At that age
I was a woman : and am I to blame
Because my daughter's a fool ? Told you indeed !
A girl of fifteen's not in need of telling :
And I'd be a nice mother to be talking
Of such things with my daughter, wouldn't I ?

AGATHA. And he—he always had a way with him,
And I was in his arms before I knew ;
And then I loathed . . . And knowing all, you let . . .

ZILLAH. What else was left to do ? Would you have
had . . .

AGATHA. Ay, anything but this.

ZILLAH. You're shameless still.

AGATHA. You cannot understand. You haven't changed.

ZILLAH. Changed, Agatha ?

AGATHA. And yet how should you change ?

You've not gone through what I have. Still it's queer
To think three years should make no difference,
When to me—but you, you speak as you spoke then.
Do you remember how you scolded and said
The Beals had always been respectable ?

ZILLAH. And so they had : there never was a Beal
Born out of wedlock, ever I heard tell of.

AGATHA. So I gave in, against my better self :
And I have been a respectable married woman,
And clung like a leech to the man who hated me
Till he shook me off.

ZILLAH. But you're his wedded wife.

AGATHA. O mother, will you never understand ?
Yes, I'm his wife, his lawful wedded wife—
And I've been faithful to my faithless husband :
Yes, I, your daughter, have been respectable :
I've not disgraced you, mother.

ZILLAH. Woman, you're bitter,
But you've cause enough if he's forsaken you.
Jim Steel was always wild.

AGATHA. Wild !

ZILLAH. From a boy :
But I little thought he'd ever go the length
Of leaving his wedded wife. Curse . . .

AGATHA.
For leaving me.

Bless him, rather,

ZILLAH. Bless him? I'd bless the tyke
If I'd him here! Yet happen, as you say,
You're as well quit of him if he's been cruel.

AGATHA. Cruel! You know he was drunk the night we
married:

He's scarce been sober since: and when a man's
In drink . . . But that's past now: we'll talk no more
About it—and a beating now and then
Is neither here nor there to a married woman
If she's respectable.

ZILLAH. You're married, lass:
That's something. If it hadn't been for me,
Dear knows where you'd be now: but I saw that Jim
Made an honest woman of you, anyway:
You've that to thank me for. But how've you lived?

AGATHA. God knows! He never did a stroke of work,
But lived on the little I could earn: we've travelled
The countryside like trampers, for whenever
I'd worked my fingers to the bone to get
A home of sorts together above our heads,
He'd always break it up and drag me out
To trail behind him to another town.

ZILLAH. You've had no bairns, then, daughter?

AGATHA. Bairns—ah God!

ZILLAH. Dead, Agatha? Happen it's well . . .

AGATHA. It's well

I should bear three stillborn babies?

ZILLAH. Stillborn, daughter?
Ah, lass, but you . . .

AGATHA. If only one had lived:
But he—he killed them, killed them. Ay, I'm bitter.

ZILLAH. You've cause enough: he's used you cruelly.
Three stillborn babies!

AGATHA. Mother, you understand?

ZILLAH. Ay, daughter, my first was stillborn.

AGATHA. I never knew.

ZILLAH. And yet your father was always good to me,
As kind as kind. But Jim has used you cruelly.

AGATHA. Well, it is over; and I have some hope . . .
But I mustn't stay here talking—time I went . . .

ZILLAH. You wouldn't go again? Where can you go?
Not after him? You'll live here surely now?

AGATHA. Nay, anywhere but here: I couldn't stay.
He'll likely weary of his mistress soon—
Poor soul, I pity her!—and seek again
His wife to keep him; and he'd come here first . . .
What startles you?

ZILLAH. I thought I heard a step.

AGATHA. Oh, I've no fear he'll be after me yet awhile:
She's young and strong.

ZILLAH. I didn't think 'twas Jim,
But Richard.

AGATHA. Richard—who?

ZILLAH. You've talked so much
Of your concerns you've given me no chance—
I've not been able to get a word in edgeways,
To tell you I'd wed again.

AGATHA. You, married, mother?

ZILLAH. A year ago I married Richard Paxton.

AGATHA. Mother, not him!

ZILLAH. Why not?

AGATHA. You married him—
And knowing he was never steady?

ZILLAH. Well,
Life is a lonely thing without a man,
And no one caring a wag of the tongue for you.
You'd left me, and never wrote; and, for all you minded,
I might be dead and buried. Naught's worse to bear
Than being left to your own company,
With not a soul in the world who cares enough
About you even to curse you. And small blame
To them who take a drop too much at whiles
For the sake of a crack with neighbours—little else
The poor can get too much of, and life at best
Is dull enough at any time, God knows:
Sometimes it's better to forget—and it's
A lovely dizziness.

AGATHA. You!

ZILLAH. Ay, you'll blame me;
But Richard is not always kind.

AGATHA. Nay, mother,
But I don't blame you—better to forget.

Forgive me if I spoke too harshly just now :
I am not bitter now : but I must go.

ZILLAH. Go where ?

AGATHA. I hardly know—but far away
From here, that I too may forget—even I,
Since I am free at last, and there's hope in me
I may bear a living, breathing baby yet.

THE NIGHT-SHIFT

*A pit-village : ROBERT CRASTER'S cottage in the early morning.
JENNY CRASTER, ROBERT CRASTER'S wife, lies in bed, her new-born baby by her side. Her eyes are closed and she seems barely conscious. TAMAR CRASTER, ROBERT CRASTER'S mother, stands at the door talking with MAGGIE THOMSON, a neighbour.*

TAMAR. My son ! But hush ! She mustn't hear : 'twould be
The death of her. 'Twill take her all her time
To pull through safely as it is, poor lass,
And if she heard her husband . . . It's not true—
Say it's not true !

MAGGIE. Too true—and little chance
Any man leaves the pit alive, they say.

TAMAR. My son ! But hush : she mustn't catch a whisper—
'Twould kill her outright, and her new-born bairn.

MAGGIE. Sooner or later she must learn, poor soul.

TAMAR. Ay, but not yet, for she's in need of sleep :
When there's no help at all, and she must learn,
Then 'twill be time enough to break the news.
She may be stronger, when she's slept a bit,
To bear what's now beyond her strength.

MAGGIE. Ay, true.

Well, I'm away : my man's already gone
To see if there's a chance of doing aught.
Thank God he happened to be on the day-shift !
If he'd been in the pit to-night ! But he
Was sound asleep beside me snug in bed,
Until the rumbling roused us, and he leapt up
And ran to the pit half-naked. I'd to stay
And hush the bairns to sleep again—the noise

Had startled them : and then I came to tell you.
 There's scarce a body left in all the village,
 The cottages all empty—every door
 Ajar as I came by, for all the wives
 Have run to the pit-head ; and I must go ;
 I cannot stay, not knowing what is happening.
 I'll bring you word if there is any news,
 Although it's feared there's little hope of rescue.

(She goes out, closing the door behind her.)

TAMAR. Robert, my son ! But I must breathe no word
 Lest she . . . She mustn't know my son's in danger,
 For he's her husband. All the womenfolk
 Are gathered round the shaft, poor wives and mothers,
 Waiting and watching and hoping against hope.
 If only I might watch among them there,
 A mother with the mothers, and share with them
 What little hope may be ; but I must bide
 At home alone with her I dare not speak to
 Or breathe a word of all my fears to. Nay,
 I must keep them to myself, although my heart . . .
 My son's in danger—yet I dare not go . . .
 For he's not only mine now any longer :
 He's a husband and a father now, and I
 Must stay at home to tend his wife and son.

JENNY *(opening her eyes and speaking in a whisper)*.
 Is Robert not home yet ?

TAMAR. Nay, daughter, nay :
 He's not home yet.

JENNY. What time is it ?

TAMAR. It's nearly . . .

*(She goes to the clock on the wall and holds the pendulum
 till it stops.)*

Nay, but the clock has stopped.

JENNY. I thought I heard it
 Ticking, and yet I cannot hear it now.
 Still it seems almost light : he shouldn't be long.
 How pleased he'll be to have a boy ! I hope
 No one will tell him till he reaches home.
 I'd like to see his face when first he learns
 He's the father of a son. . . . He'll soon be home—
 Be home . . . My baby ! He'll be so pleased . . . I hope
 Nobody'll tell him . . .

TAMAR. Nay, lass, they'll not tell . . .
 But you mustn't chatter ; you're too weak to talk,
 And you must save yourself until . . .

JENNY. He comes.
 Yes, I'll lie very quiet and save myself
 So's I may see him when first he learns . . . What's that—
 A sound of tapping somewhere ? Don't you hear it ?

TAMAR. Nay, I hear naught.

JENNY. I thought it was the clock.

TAMAR. The clock has stopped.

JENNY. It must be in my head, then ;
 It keeps on tapping, tapping. . . .
 He'll soon be home, but I'm so very tired
 And cannot keep awake at all : I'll sleep
 Till he comes home ; and Tamar, you'll be sure
 To waken me the moment he comes home ?
 You'll not forget ?

TAMAR. Nay, lass, I'll not forget.

JENNY (*drowsily sinking back into unconsciousness*).
 It keeps on tapping, tapping . . .
 Tap . . . tap . . . tap . . . tap . . .

TAMAR. Till he comes home—ah God, how shall I tell
 her ?
 For I must tell her soon, must break the news . . .
 I cannot keep it from her long, and I—
 His mother, must be the first to tell his wife
 That he, her husband, never again . . . And still,
 He may come home even yet. And she must know
 Naught now, for she's too weak : 'twould kill her outright.
 And after all he may come home again
 Before there's any need to tell her aught.
 When there's no help for it and she must know,
 Then 'twill be time enough to break her heart :
 She'll have a longer spell than I to bear it,
 For she is young ; and I—I seem quite old
 So suddenly ! She said she heard a sound
 Of tapping. She might have heard my heart almost,
 It beat so loudly in my side while she
 Was speaking of my son, her husband, wondering . . .
 But may he not come safe home after all ?
 She may be speaking truly when she says
 He'll soon be home : and yet she heard a sound

Of tapping, while I heard nothing but my heart,
My old heart dinning and drumming in my ears.

JENNY (*sitting up suddenly in bed and gazing into vacancy*).
Hark!

There it is again . . .

A sound of tapping.

I hear it tapping, tapping,

Like a pick—

Tap . . . tap . . . tap . . . tap . . .

TAMAR. A pick ah God! Nay, daughter, there is nothing.
You must be quiet now or you . . .

JENNY. Tap . . . tap . . .

It goes on tapping, tapping

In the dark . . .

It's dark, so dark,

And I can hardly breathe,

So heavily the darkness presses on me,

As though I wandered somewhere underground

With all the earth above me,

With great rocks hanging overhead

So close that my hair touches them,

Although I cannot see them,

And I can feel them with my hand . . .

Oh, they are falling, falling . . .

I've pulled them down on me—

The great black rocks . . .

(*She sinks back exhausted.*)

TAMAR. Nay, lass, you're lying safe in your own bed,
Your own warm bed beside your little son.

JENNY (*drowsily*). My little son—when he comes home he'll be
So pleased . . .

But still I hear a sound of tapping . . .

Tap . . . tap . . . tap . . . tap . . .

(*She dozes over.*)

TAMAR. My son! Nay, there's no hope, for she hears some-
thing—

Something I cannot catch : the wife's heart hears

What the old mother's may not because it beats

Too loudly. . . .

(*She sits for a while gazing into the fire.*)

JENNY (*sitting up again suddenly*).

Will no one stop that tapping?

I cannot sleep for it. . . .
 Somebody's shut in somewhere
 And trying to get out.
 Will no one let him out
 And stop that tapping ?
 It keeps on tapping, tapping . . .
 Tap . . . tap . . . tap . . . tap . . .
 And I can scarcely breathe—
 The darkness is so thick :
 It stifles me
 And weighs so heavily on me,
 And drips, and drips . . .
 My hair is wet already :
 There's water all about my knees :
 I cannot see it, but I hear it swishing
 At every step,
 And feel it dripping cold—
 The darkness dripping down on me,
 So cold, so cold . . .
 And yet . . .
 I cannot breathe—
 The darkness is so thick and hot ;
 It's like a furnace-blast,
 And weighs so heavily,
 As though great rocks were hanging overhead,
 And dripping, dripping . . .
 I cannot lift my feet—
 The water holds them :
 It's creeping, creeping . . .
 My wet hair drags me down.
 Ah God !
 Will no one stop that tapping ?
 I cannot sleep . . .
 And I would sleep
 Till he comes home . . .
 Tap . . . tap . . . tap . . . tap . . .
 (*She sinks back exhausted.*)

TAMAR. O God, have mercy on her and on me !
 She hears, but doesn't know what it is she hears,
 While I, though I hear nothing, I know all.
 Robert, my son !

JENNY (*starting up again*).

I cannot breathe . . .
 The darkness is so thick—
 So thick and hot :
 It stifles me . . .
 Ah God, the darkness is ablaze . . .
 And falling, falling . . .
 Rocks are falling—
 Great, black, dripping rocks . . .
 And I am falling . . .
 And there's some one tapping
 As though he would be in.
 Why don't you let him in ?
 It's Robert wants
 To see his son. . . .
 Can you not hear a tapping, tapping,
 Like the tapping of a pick ?
 Tap . . . tap . . .
 But it grows fainter . . .
 Now I cannot hear it.
 The darkness has come down on me--
 I sink . . . I sink . . .

(She lies back exhausted.)

TAMAR. She doesn't hear it now . . . and now it seems

Almost as if my heart . . . my heart had stopped.
 I cannot breathe . . . But she is sleeping soundly :
 And sleep will give her strength. She's scarcely slept
 Since he was born, the poor wee innocent !
 He's sleeping too. If only I were in
 As deep a sleep—I'm weary enough, God knows—
 And yet how could I sleep ? They only sleep
 Because they do not know, but I—I know.
 Robert, my son !

(She sits gazing into the fire. After a while JENNY awakens and looks about her.)

JENNY. My own, my little son !
 Your daddy'll soon be home : he'll be so pleased :
 But he should be home now surely—it's light.
 Has Robert not come home yet ?

TAMAR. Nay, not yet.

JENNY. What time . . .

TAMAR. The clock has stopped.

JENNY. What ever keeps him
I wonder? It is light . . .

TAMAR. Nay, woman, nay—
It's not light yet : it's dark, quite dark—black night !
You're weakly still and you've been wandering : now
You're talking foolishness. You mustn't speak,
But go to sleep and waken well and strong.

JENNY. It seems quite light.

TAMAR. Nay . . . it is dark . . . God knows !

JENNY. I think I could sleep again until he comes.

(She sinks gradually into a deeper slumber. TAMAR sits for a while gazing into the fire with vacant eyes. Suddenly she speaks, her voice little more than a whisper.)

TAMAR. It's dark . . . quite dark . . . Robert, my son !

(She falls forward on the hearthrug and lies motionless. Some time passes. Presently voices are heard without : the door opens quietly and MAGGIE THOMSON enters, followed by her daughter, LIZZIE.)

MAGGIE. Tamar, where are you ? Quick lass—she's fallen :
She must have fainted when . . . the shock . . . O God !
She doesn't breathe : her heart has failed her : and I—
I went and left her here alone . . . his mother !

LIZZIE. The clock has stopped.

MAGGIE. Look to the wife—she may . . .

LIZZIE. She's sleeping soundly.

MAGGIE. Poor Jenny—and her bairn
Is fatherless.

LIZZIE. He's snuggled to her breast,
And sleeping too. A fine big boy he is.

THE OPERATION

A room in tenements late at night. WILLIAM LOWRY, who is a printer by trade, sits in an armchair by the fire with his coat off, reading a newspaper. The door opens and HESTER LOWRY, his wife, comes in from marketing. Over her arm is a basket, laden with purchases, which she sets on the table with a sigh.

WILLIAM. You're late : you should have let me come with
you :
That basket's over-heavy for you.

HESTER. Nay,
'Twasn't the basket, William : I was kept.

WILLIAM. What kept you, wife ? The shops would not be
thronged
To-night.

HESTER. No lad, I finished with the shops
Three hours ago. I had to await my turn.

WILLIAM. Your turn ? Who kept you, wife ?

HESTER. The doctors.

WILLIAM. Doctors ?

HESTER. I thought 'twas time to have the thing away,
And so I went to see about it, husband.
The doctors shook their heads, and said next week
Might have been too late.

WILLIAM. Too late—too late ?
What ails you, honey ? I never knew . . .

HESTER. They say
It's cancer : they were kind and wanted me
To stay and have it done at once to-night :
They'd hardly let me leave, but I said I must
Come home to see you first. They'll take me in
To-morrow.

WILLIAM. To-morrow, wife ? And I never knew . . .
You must have guessed before you went ?

HESTER. I knew,
And 'twas no shock to me : I've known so long.

WILLIAM. So long—and never told me ! But lass, the pain—
You must have suffered . . .

HESTER. Ay, 'twas bad to bear :
At first I scarcely kept from crying out,
But as the years went by . . .

WILLIAM. The years ? You've had
The pain for years ?

HESTER. Ay, William, on and off :
It's full eleven years since first I felt it.

WILLIAM. And from the very first you knew . . .

HESTER. I knew ;
My father died of it.

WILLIAM. Eleven years—
And never breathed a word or murmured once,
But patiently . . .

HESTER. I come of fisher-folk

Who live on patience. It's of little use
For men to be impatient with the sea.

WILLIAM. And I—I never knew—I never guessed !
I've seen you day by day, and slept each night
Beside you, yet you never once let on
Or murmured once.

HESTER. I kept the thing from you :
'Twould not have eased the pain to make you share it :
You slept the sounder, knowing nothing, William,
Though there were times the gnawing was so bad
I could have torn . . .

WILLIAM. And I slept on unknowing !
You never even roused me, Hester, once :
And every little ache I've had I've made
A pretty song about it !

HESTER. You've made a song !
And what about the time your arm was caught
In the wheels of the machine, and you were hanging
By the flesh a mortal hour till you were freed !

WILLIAM. Nay, Michael held me up upon his back.

HESTER. But all the while your arm was in the wheels :
You never even murmured once, they say,
And only laughed and jested all the time,
Although they had to take a chisel and cut
Each cog out separately before the flesh
Was freed. How you could bear the strain and jar,
And never once lose heart, I cannot think,
And your poor arm with all the sinews torn !

WILLIAM. I've never really played the fiddle since :
I've got to make the notes that used to come.
But you, wife, all these years—and I slept on !
It seems incredible I could be so blind,
So dense, when you were suffering, and you could keep
Your dreadful secret from me all these years.

HESTER. 'Twould not have eased the pain . . .

WILLIAM. But, if I'd known,
You should have seen a doctor at the first.

HESTER. I knew you couldn't spare me, husband, then :
Those were not easy times, even as it was—
You, laid off idle through your accident,
And Letty, just a baby, and we'd both
Enough to do to keep the home together.

I trusted I'd be able to keep things going
Till I should be past doing things ; and now
The time has come ; but I have saved a bit,
And Letty's thirteen past and finished schooling,
And old enough to manage for you grandly.
Is she in bed ?

WILLIAM. She went an hour ago :
She wanted sorely to sit up for you,
But she was sleepy and I wouldn't let her.

HESTER. Ay, she's been at it all day long, poor bairn ;
And she's a handy lass as ever was,
And will do well enough for you until . . .

WILLIAM. Does Letty know ?

HESTER. Nay, she knows nothing, William,
And I shall tell her nothing till the morning ;
It wouldn't do to spoil her sleep. Poor lass,
She little dreams ! But she's a plucky girl,
And I have taught her everything, and she
Can manage a house and cook and scrub and mend
As well as any woman. You'll scarce miss me,
Even if the worst comes to the worst, with Letty . . .

WILLIAM. Hester !

HESTER. I've seen to your clothes, and there are shirts
And hose enough to last for many weeks—
To last until . . . I mayn't be long away.

WILLIAM. O wife, it's terrible . . . I cannot think . . .
It seems so strange you could keep it all those years . . .

HESTER. You never knew my father : he suffered long,
Poor man, but didn't rightly know 'twas cancer
Till very nigh the end. . It laid him low
At last when he was far away from home,
After the herring in the western seas.
The doctor said he must return by train,
But he'd not leave the boat, and so his mates
Set sail at once—the season just begun,
And catches heavier than they'd been for years—
And brought him home ; and, as the *Ella* neared
The harbour, he left his bunk, and took the tiller
And brought her in himself. Though in his heart
He must have known 'twas the last time, he'd a smile
Of greeting for us, and when the boat was berthed,
He looked my mother bravely in the eyes

And clasped her hand, and they went home together.
 He never rose from off his bed again :
 The doctors could do nothing : but he was brave
 And gay till the end, and always smiled and said
 It didn't hurt much, though his teeth were clenched
 And his strong fingers clutched the bedclothes tight.

WILLIAM. And you're his daughter, wife !

HESTER.

But I've cried out

Before I'm hurt too sorely. The doctors said
 Next week it might have been too late perhaps . . .
 It's taken in the nick of time. I'll soon
 Be well again. Folk every day go through
 As much and more ; it's naught to fuss about :
 I've only one more night to bear the pain—
 And then . . .

WILLIAM. Ay, Hester, you should soon be well
 With such a heart in you to pull you through ;
 And yet if you had gone too long ! You should
 Have told me at the first and let us fend
 For ourselves until . . .

HESTER.

My father brought his boat in.

*(The inner door opens, and LETTY stands in the doorway
 in her nightgown.)*

LETTY. Is mother not home yet ? Oh, there you are !
 You stayed so long to-night, I've been asleep
 And dreaming—such a dreadful dream. I dreamt
 You were . . . But you are home now safe and sound.
 You are not ailing, mother ?

HESTER.

I'm as well

As I have been for years. But you'll catch cold :
 You'd better get to bed again : come, daughter.

LETTY. But I shall dream.

HESTER.

Nay, you'll sleep sound to-night.

THE CALL

*The engine-house of a fire-station. The firemen are gathered in
 knots, talking in subdued voices, scarcely audible above the
 racket of the street. SETH HERDMAN paces backwards and
 forwards impetuously by himself, when CHRISTOPHER BELL
 approaches him, holding out a hand.*

CHRISTOPHER. The best of luck !

SETH. I fear there's little hope.

CHRISTOPHER. Nay, keep your heart up : you can never tell.
When my first was born, my wife had long been ailing,
And little chance there seemed for her, yet now,
Though she's the mother of six sonsie lasses,
She's heartier than she's been in all her life.

SETH. The doctor says he thinks she mayn't pull through.

CHRISTOPHER. But even doctors don't know everything.
Your wife is plucky, and pluck counts for much—
For all in this life : it's in their own hearts
Men live and die : and she'll surprise them yet.
You must be plucky too and not lose heart.
Your mother tends her, and you know your mother !
And only think, if all goes well upstairs
How proud you'll be. I know, for I'm a father :
There's not a prouder man in all the world.

SETH. If all goes well . . .

CHRISTOPHER. You'll be the happiest man . . .
There'll be no holding you.

SETH. If I but knew !

CHRISTOPHER. The waiting's a sore trial, but, lad, just think
What luck we're not called out, so far, to-night :
It would be hard to go now.

SETH. Harder still
To stand here doing nothing while she—while she . . .
If only I had got a job to tackle
I'd bear the waiting better—a job that left
No time for brooding. It's the very devil
To think, when you can only think so far—
Your thoughts in a blind alley, brought up short
By a blank wall again and yet again.
I'd rather be at work on a blazing roof
Than standing idle with such thoughts at work—
Just running round and round in my own head,
While she . . . while she . . .

CHRISTOPHER. Ay, lad, I understand :
Uncertainty's the devil ; but you must dwell
On the lucky chance, and happen 'twill be yours ;
And then you'll be the happiest of men.
You cannot think the difference children make :
No house is home unless there's children in it.

MARY.

The baby lives.

SETH. And she? And she?

(The fire-alarm sounds and all the men spring to their places on the engine.)

Thank God, there's work! Come, lads!

THE WOUND

A room in tenements occupied by PHILIP DROVER, a ship's riveter, and his wife, HETTY. HETTY DROVER stands alone near the window, gazing out with unseeing eyes. She has a wound on her brow and another on her hand, but seems oblivious of them. A footstep on the stairs arouses her, and she hastily pulls her hair over her brow, hides her hand beneath her apron, and moves towards the cradle in which her baby is sleeping. The door opens and her mother, SUSAN WELCH, enters.

HETTY. You, mother?

SUSAN. I've just come . . . Why, what's amiss?

You look so pale—and, oh, your brow's all blood—

A dreadful wound! Nay, do not touch it, lass.

Your hand is bleeding too!

HETTY. It's nothing.

SUSAN. Nothing?

A wound like that—you call it nothing, daughter?

But I must bind it up instead of talking:

Words won't heal wounds, though often enough they cause them.

(She takes some old linen from a drawer, fills a basin with water, and washes and binds the wound on HETTY'S forehead.)

Ah, what a gash—your poor, poor brow! How ever

You came by such a cut I cannot think.

HETTY. I fell.

SUSAN. You fell? How did you come to fall?

HETTY. I hardly know.

SUSAN. You hardly know?

HETTY. I think

I must have slipped somehow and struck the fender,

And clutched the grate in falling: my hand is burnt,

Though I didn't feel it then. . . .

SUSAN. You think you slipped?

And then you call it nothing—a gaping wound
Clean to the bone ? Perhaps you're dazed a bit :
I shouldn't wonder, for you've lost much blood.
When did it happen, daughter ?

HETTY. Long ago.

SUSAN. It cannot be so long ; the wound still bleeds.

HETTY. Long . . . long ago . . . I don't know what I'm saying !

An hour ago, perhaps.

SUSAN. An hour ago—

Then Philip had not gone ?

HETTY. Nay, he'd not gone. . . .

SUSAN. How ever did he come to leave you, lass,
In such a plight ?

HETTY. O mercy, but I'm dazed
And don't know what I'm saying at all ! He'd left
Long, long before. . . .

SUSAN. What set him off so early ?
He hasn't far to go, and then the yard
Wouldn't be open.

HETTY. I don't know why he went.
Happen he had a mind to take a turn . . .

SUSAN. On such a morning, daughter ?

HETTY. And why not ?

A drop of rain is neither here nor there
With menfolk : it would take a pretty splash,
I fancy, to keep Phil indoors. But then
I don't know why he went : I only know
He'd gone long, long . . . Why, woman, can you think
He'd go and leave me lying . . . go and leave me
Half-senseless on the hearth . . . he'd go . . . he'd go . . .
And never turn . . . though I . . . though I . . . But he
Was gone long, long before I tumbled—long !
He kissed me before he went . . . he always kisses . . .
Ay, and his baby—took it in his arms
And kissed it : he's the best of fathers ; he loves
His baby . . . ay, he's never harsh with it—
That crossed my mind while I lay listening
For his return.

SUSAN. You thought he'd come again ?

HETTY. I don't know what I'm saying ! How could he come,
When he'd been long at work, and knowing nothing ?

SUSAN. Still, lass . . .

HETTY. You don't believe . . .

SUSAN. I scarce know what
To make of it.

HETTY. When have I lied to you,
That you should doubt . . .

SUSAN. You've been a truthful girl ;
But maids have little to hide, and married women
Don't always find truth come so easily
When husbands are in question ; and I've guessed
Philip . . .

HETTY. You cannot think he'd go and slam
The door behind him, and leave me lying helpless ?
But you . . . why do you look at me like that ?
What can I say ?

SUSAN. Say nothing.

HETTY. You don't believe me ?
You think that . . .

SUSAN. I know Philip's hot at times,
And you would screen him.

HETTY. Nay, there's naught to screen :
'Twas I that . . . Nay, and if he's hot at times,
You know he's much to try him, and the racket
He works in all day long would fret a saint.
You know, none better, how soon a riveter's done :
The hammers break a man before his time,
And father was a shattered man at forty,
And Philip's thirty-five ; and if he's failed
A bit . . . and sometimes over-hasty—well,
I'm over-hasty too : you know my temper—
You've cause . . .

SUSAN. But such a wound—and then to go
And leave . . .

HETTY. You dare to look me in the eyes,
And say you think he struck . . .

SUSAN. Whisht, daughter, whisht !
There's some one at the door. I'll open it.

*(She goes to the door and throws it open, when JOHN RIDDLE,
a riveter, steps in, but hesitates on the threshold without
speaking.)*

SUSAN. What, John, you here ? Are you not working, then ?

JOHN. Ay, but I'm working : I only left the yard

Just now : I've come . . .

HETTY. Oh, tell me what has happened !
Why don't you speak ? Will you stand there all day
And never speak at all ?

JOHN. I've that to tell
Which is not spoken easily, God knows—
Nor easy hearing for a wife.

HETTY. Speak out :
You know I'm no coward : speak, John—where is Philip ?

JOHN. They're bringing him along.

HETTY. They're bringing him . . .
And I . . . I lay and listened for his return. . . .

SUSAN. How did it happen ?

JOHN. How—I scarcely know,
Though I was face to face with him—he and I
Were hammer-mates, and sat astride the beam ;
And I was chaffing him, but he seemed dazed,
And when the red-hot rivet was thrust up
He never struck : he must have lost his nerve.
I took his turn ; and still he did not strike,
But looked at it bewildered ; and all at once
He started and cried out : “ It bleeds ! It bleeds ! ”
And then his fingers slackened on the hammer,
Which clattered to the bottom of the boat :
And then he swayed and tumbled after it.
I tried to clutch . . .

SUSAN. And nothing broke his fall ?

JOHN. We found him at the bottom in a heap.

SUSAN. Dead ?

JOHN. At the point of death : he hardly breathed ;
But bending over him I caught a whisper
Before the end came.

HETTY. Spare me what he said :
I dare not hear it.

JOHN. I'd not hurt . . .

HETTY. Nay, nay—
Speak out ! I am no coward—I . . . Tell all—
Tell all he said.

JOHN. There isn't much to tell.
He whispered : “ Lass, forgive me ! ” Then he died.

HETTY. Forgive you, lad ? There's nothing to forgive :
'Twas I who angered you : my foolish tongue. . . .

It's I who need forgiveness. . . . But I . . . I'm dazed
 And don't know what I'm saying. Nay, man, nay !
 You didn't hear aright. Why should he beg
 Forgiveness of me, his wife ? He needed none—
 And he the best of husbands ! And I lay
 And listened for his step. . . . If he'd but turned !
 I'll never hear his step again. . . . I lay . . .
 There's nothing to forgive . . . 'twas I . . . And now
 Where shall I seek forgiveness ? And I lay
 And listened . . .

SUSAN. Steps are coming up the court.

JOHN (*starting forward and catching HETTY in his arms as she swoons*). Nay, steady, woman !

HETTY. He's coming back again.

SUMMER-DAWN

A farm-labourer's cottage, before dawn. LABAN CARPENTER still lies in bed dozing, but BETTY CARPENTER, his wife, is already dressed and is setting a kettle on the newly-lit fire. In the bed beside LABAN is a six-months-old baby, and in another bed are five children, all under the age of seven : the boys sleeping at one end of the bed, and the girls at the other.

BETTY. Come, lad, get up or we'll be late.

LABAN.

So soon ?

What time is it ?

BETTY. It's getting on for three.

The fire is burning famously : I'll have

The kettle boiling in a twinkling now.

We'll have a cup of tea before we start,

To keep the bitter chill out of our bones :

It's raw work turning out these dewy mornings.

LABAN. It hardly seems an hour since I lay down.

BETTY. 'Twas half-past ten, at most, when you turned in :
 You'd scarcely got your trousers off before
 You'd dropt asleep, and snoring like a pig
 Till I turned you off your back. 'Twas nigh eleven
 When I lay down,

LABAN. I can't tell how you manage. ⁵⁸
 A man must have his sleep out if he's to do
 His day's work. Women somehow seem . . .

BETTY. Come, lad,
 Don't lie there talking : stir yourself . . .

LABAN. My back
 Is nearly broken, Betty.

BETTY. Some folks' backs
 Are easily broken.

LABAN. You call it easily ?
 Gey easy hoeing turnips every night
 Till it's too dark to see our feet, and then
 To start again at dawn—and summer nights
 So short !

BETTY. If summer nights were longer, Laban,
 Your children would go shoeless through the winter.

LABAN. Ay, still it's heavy on a man as well
 As all his day's work.

BETTY. What about my day's work ?
 Your day's work will not keep you housed and fed,
 You and your family. If your father'd talked
 Like that, where'd you be now ? He can have been
 No lie-abed : he'd not a lazy bone
 In all his body. Why, I have heard him boast
 A hundred times : " Though I have had bad seasons,
 I've not done far amiss, since I have reared
 Eleven men and women." Ay, and your mother
 Crippled with rheumatism, and in her bed
 For more than half her lifetime, and only him
 To do the housework single-handed, and see
 To the lot of you, and keep you decent until
 The girls were old enough to give a hand,
 As well as all his day's work. And you talk
 Of day's work ! Why, I've often heard him tell
 How once, to save the wheat, he worked a week
 Wellnigh without a wink of sleep—all day
 Labouring at his own job in Stobshill mine,
 And helping in the harvest field all night.

LABAN. And then he slept.

BETTY. Doubtless he slept his fill—
 But not till all was harvested : the wheat
 Was saved before your father took his rest.

LABAN. Ay, somehow fathers . . .

BETTY. You're a father too,

And should think shame to lie and grumble there :

Only too thankful you should be we're able

To earn a little extra in the summer

To tide us over the winter.

LABAN. True, wife, true :

And still it's hard that in an honest day's work

A strong man cannot earn enough to keep

His wife and bairns.

BETTY. Twelve shillings don't go far,

With rents so high and food and clothes and firing :

But I have little to grumble at ; I've only

Six bairns to feed : my mother had thirteen,

And ten born after father'd lost his sight

Blasting, soon after they were wed ; and she'd

Three babes in arms at once, the twins and Dick.

I've heard her say—before the boy was born,

While she lay sick in bed and near her time,

Her two poor helpless babies at the bed-foot

Sat up with big eyes watching her, good as gold,

And she, poor woman, wondering all the while

How she'd contrive to nurse the three at once.

I cannot think how she got through at all,

But when I used to ask her she would answer :

“ Ay, looking back, you wonder how you managed,

But at the time each thing you do for them

Makes you so happy you think nothing of it.”

And mother had the truth of things : and we're

Quite rich to her ; she'd hoe a day for sixpence,

And spent her life's best years in picking stones :

And, as for holidays, she'd only one

That ever I heard tell of—ay, and that

When she'd been married hard on fifteen years :

She went to see her cousin at the Stell,

And rode both ways in Peter Paxton's pig-cart ;

And ever afterwards she used to say

She couldn't tell why folk liked holidays,

Or why they need go seeking happiness

While they had homes to work in, and, for her part,

She couldn't see any pleasure in sitting still,

In sitting like a mommet all day long

In other people's houses, with cold legs
 And idle, folded hands, when there was always
 A heap of darning to be done at home,
 And one's own hearth to sit in comfort by :
 Though there was little sitting down for her
 At any time at all : she couldn't rest—
 Up first and last to bed, I never saw
 Her quiet till the end. " Time and enough
 To lie with folded hands when you are straked,"
 She used to say sometimes. She always hoped
 That death would find her working, and her wish
 Was granted her : death found her at the job
 She liked the best : the clothes she washed that week
 Were left for me to iron. Ay, mother knew
 What hardship was, and laboured day and night
 To rear her children.

LABAN. Always children, children !
 A woman slaves her very life away
 To rear her children, and they grow up and slave
 Their lives away to rear their children. Ay—
 But we little thought when we were married, lass !
 Do you remember the fine summer nights
 We first walked out together, you and I ?
 Ah, those were happy times : we little thought . . .

BETTY. You little thought ? I knew—and still was happy :
 No girl was ever happier than I
 When first I walked with you in Malden Meadows :
 But I am happy now, for all the difference.
 Life wasn't over-easy even then ;
 I didn't have a light time at the farm,
 Though I was but a bairn or little more :
 On Monday mornings we were up at one
 To get the washing through and out to dry
 Before 'twas time to set about the day's work.
 I wasn't fifteen then, but I remember
 The coast-guards whistling to us as they passed
 The lighted kitchen window on the cold,
 Black winter mornings ; and often I'd been at it
 For hours before you turned out with your team.
 I used to think that you went bravely, Laban,
 Behind your dappled pair.

LABAN (*rising*). And little guessing

Life would be labour, labour till the end :
I thought there would be ease somewhere.

BETTY. If men
Will marry and have bairns, they mustn't look
For ease in this world. Yet, you'd never be
A boy again, unwedded, surely, Laban ?

LABAN. Nay, but I couldn't do without you.

BETTY. Then
It's only you've too many bairns, I take it—
Too many little hungry mouths to fill,
Too many little feet to keep in leather ?
Can you look on them lying sleeping there—
My father never once set eyes on me !—
And talk like that ? I wonder you've the heart.
And is it Tommy you would be without ?
You've had him longest and perhaps you're tired . . .

LABAN. Nay, wife, he was the first of all to come ;
And you were such a girl, just seventeen,
And I just nineteen. Do you call to mind
How proud we were ? There never was a baby . . .

BETTY. Or is it Nell, who brings your bait to you ?

LABAN. She grows more like her mother every day.

BETTY. It must be Robin, that the neighbours all
Declare takes after you.

LABAN. Ay, sure enough
He's got his father's temper, the little Turk !
BETTY. Or is it Kit and Kate, the twins ? For sure
They should be twice too much for you.

LABAN. Folk say
That such a bonnie pair was never seen
In the countryside.

BETTY. There's just the baby left.
Poor little mite, so you're the one too many !

LABAN. Come, lass, enough of teasing : you know well
I was only talking ; and I'm ready now
For work.

BETTY. The kettle's boiling.

(She makes the tea and fills two mugs.)

Drink it up.

'Twill help to keep the chill out of our bones.

LABAN. Ay, but it's dank work hoeing swedes at dawn.

BETTY. The sun will soon be up.

LABAN.
A deal too soon for me.

The sun gets up

BETTY. Nay, never rail
Against the sun. I'd sooner be shut away
From you than from the sunshine any time :
I'll never hear a word against the sun.

[They take up their hoes from behind the door, give a last look at their sleeping children, and go out together into the dawn.]

HOLIDAY

A room in tenements on the evening of Whit-Monday. EVA SPARKES, a widow, sits by the bed on which her daughter, NELLY, lies unconscious with her eyes open, and her hands moving in a regular succession of mechanical motions. Her second daughter, POLLY, stands near the window looking out into the dismal court.

EVA. Her hands are never quiet for a moment.

POLLY. She's tending the machine and slipping in
The brush-backs, as we do the livelong day,
Day after day and every blessed day,
Year in, year out, year in, year out, except
On Sundays and Bank Holidays. To think
To-day's Whit-Monday and Bank Holiday—
And what a holiday for her, poor lass !

EVA. She cannot rest : her hands keep working, working.
It must be weary work at best, but now . . .

POLLY. And yet we're always at it all day long,
Year in, year out, until it drives us dizzy
And likely we slip in a hand as she did
The other day, poor lass. Six holes it drills—
And then they call it carelessness.

EVA. 'Twas that
Began the trouble—her poor broken hand :
It gives me quite a turn to think of it :
She's never been herself since then. It's hard
She cannot rest at all.

POLLY. To think to-day's
Bank Holiday !—and last year she was dancing.

EVA. She's ever been a dancer, from a bairn,
 Has Nelly—even as a babe-in-arms,
 I couldn't keep her quiet if she heard
 An organ playing half a street away :
 She'd jig and jig till it took me all my time
 To hold the jumping jenny on my lap.
 Such nimble toes she had : 'twas in her blood ;
 I danced before I married, though afterwards
 I'd little list for it : but in my day,
 While I'd the heart, I danced among the best :
 When first your father saw me I was dancing.

POLLY. Only last year she danced the livelong day—
 She danced us all out easily although
 The sun was blazing and we were fit to drop.
 I think she would have danced herself to death,
 But Daniel stopped the music : even he
 Was done, dead-beat, though he's not easily puffed.

EVA. He'd scarcely go to-day at all—he said
 He couldn't go without her, couldn't bear
 To leave her, and not knowing . . . But I told him
 'Twas worse than useless for him to sit watching. . . .
 I think he only went away at last
 Because he couldn't bear to see her hands.
 It's bad enough for me, and almost more
 Than I can stand : I couldn't have him too
 Watching her hands. I cannot help but watch
 Her poor, poor hands : they're never still a moment.
 All night I watched . . .

POLLY. And last year she was dancing
 The livelong day—was dancing in the sun ;
 And there was no one who could dance with her :
 I don't know where she picked up half the steps—
 There seemed to be no end to them, as though
 She made them up as she went on : they seemed
 To come to her as easily as walking.
 She danced and danced.

EVA. Ay, she'd a dancing heart.

POLLY. And as she danced you scarcely saw her feet
 move
 Because they went so quickly ; and it dazzled,
 The sunlight sparkling on her dancing buckles
 That twinkled in and out beneath her flounces :

She'd never slipped her hand before : she worked
As madly as she danced, and she danced madly.

EVA. She'll dance no more. Poor Daniel, I'd no heart
To tell him outright there's no hope for her.
He never asked me what the doctor said :
Happen he knew somehow : it isn't words
Tell us the most : we oftener learn the truth
Without them. And the lad was loth to go,
Yet couldn't bear to see . . . I cannot bear
To watch them, yet I cannot keep my eyes off :
They're always working, working, poor broken hands—
And once they'd beat to music on my breast
When she was a laughing baby in my lap.
Would God that time had never passed !

POLLY. To think
They'll all be dancing while she lies like this !

EVA. Dan went, but he was loth enough to go ;
And there'll be little dancing for him to-day
And many days to come. He'll not bide late :
I looked for him by now : he'll not have heart . . .

POLLY. And we are only " hands " ! And in the end . . .
I wonder if I'll lie like that some day
With fingers working uselessly ? God spare me !
But I think there's little chance : I never worked
Or danced as she did. She would dance . . .

EVA. I smell
Hawthorn as strongly now as we could smell it
After a shower.

POLLY. There's some one on the stairs :
I think it's Daniel.

*(The door opens and DANIEL WEBSTER enters quietly,
carrying a branch of hawthorn.)*

DANIEL. How's Nelly now ?
I've brought some bloom for her : I thought she might . . .
Last year she liked the bloom . . . a year to-day
She danced beneath the hawthorn on the heath.
I couldn't stay to see them jigging—and yet
I cannot bear to watch . . .

EVA *(turning suddenly towards the bed)*. Her hands have
stopped :
She's quiet now. Ah God, she's getting up !
She'll fall !

(They move towards NELLY as she rises from the bed ; but something in her eyes stays them half-way, and they stand spellbound as she steps to the ground and stumbles towards DANIEL, stretching out her hand for the hawthorn, which he gives her without a word. Holding the branch over her head, she begins to dance slowly, her feet gradually moving more quickly.)

NELLY. Faster . . . faster . . . faster . . .

Who's stopped the music ? Oh !

(She pauses, stands for a moment swaying, then drops to the floor in a heap.)

EVA *(bending over her)*. Ah God, she's done ! She doesn't breathe.

(DANIEL stoops and picks up the dropt branch from the floor.)

DANIEL. It's fallen now, the bloom . . . I thought she might . . . Last year she danced . . . and now . . . I brought the bloom . . .

EVA. Her hands stopped working when she smelt the blossom : It set her dancing, dancing to her death.

DANIEL. O Christ, what have I done—what have I done ? Nelly, I brought the bloom . . .

POLLY.

She's had her wish.

*All life moving to one measure—
Daily bread, daily bread—
Bread of life and bread of labour,
Bread of bitterness and sorrow,
Hand-to-mouth and no to-morrow,
Dearth for housemate, death for neighbour . . .*

*“ Yet when all the babes are fed,
Love, are there not crumbs to treasure ? ”*

FIRES
(1912)

TO
GEORGE CLAUSEN
A TRIBUTE

*SNUG in my easy chair,
I stirred the fire to flame.
Fantastically fair
The flickering fancies came,
Born of heart's desire—
Amber woodlands streaming ;
Topaz islands dreaming ;
Sunset-cities gleaming,
Spire on burning spire ;
Ruddy-windowed taverns ;
Sunshine-spilling wines ;
Crystal-lighted caverns
Of Golconda's mines ;
Summers, unreturning ;
Passion's crater yearning ;
Troy, the ever-burning ;
Shelley's lustral pyre ;
Dragon-eyes unsleeping :
Witches' cauldrons leaping ;
Golden galleys sweeping
Out of sea-walled Tyre—
Fancies fugitive and fair
Flashed with singing through the air
Till, dazzled by the drowsy glare,
I shut my eyes to heat and light,
And saw in sudden night,
Crouched in the dripping dark
With steaming shoulders stark,
The man who hews the coal to feed my fire.*

THE STONE

*AND will you cut a stone for him,
To set above his head ?
And will you cut a stone for him—
A stone for him ?* she said.

Three days before a splintered rock
Had struck her lover dead—
Had struck him in the quarry dead,
Where, careless of the warning call,
He loitered while the shot was fired—
A lively stripling brave and tall,
And sure of all his heart desired. . . .
A flash, a shock,
A rumbling fall . . .
And broken 'neath the broken rock,
A lifeless heap with face of clay,
And still as any stone, he lay
With eyes that saw the end of all.

I went to break the news to her,
And I could hear my own heart beat
With dread of what my lips might say ;
But some poor fool had sped before
And, flinging wide her father's door,
Had blurted out the news to her,
Had struck her lover dead for her,
Had struck the girl's heart dead in her,
Had struck life lifeless at a word
And dropped it at her feet,
Then hurried on his witless way,
Scarce knowing she had heard.
And when I came she stood alone—
A woman turned to stone,

And though no word at all she said,
I knew that all was known.

Because her heart was dead
She did not sigh nor moan.
His mother wept :
She could not weep.
Her lover slept :
She could not sleep.
Three days, three nights,
She did not stir :
Three days, three nights,
Were one to her,
Who never closed her eyes
From sunset to sunrise,
From dawn to evenfall,
Her tearless staring eyes
That, seeing naught, saw all.

The fourth night when I came from work
I found her at my door.
And will you cut a stone for him ?
She said, and spoke no more,
But followed me as I went in,
And sank upon a chair,
And fixed her grey eyes on my face
With still unseeing stare.
And as she waited patiently
I could not bear to feel
Those still grey eyes that followed me,
Those eyes that plucked the heart from me,
Those eyes that sucked the breath from me,
And curdled the warm blood in me,
Those eyes that cut me to the bone
And pierced my marrow like cold steel.

And so I rose and sought a stone,
And cut it smooth and square ;
And as I worked she sat and watched
Beside me in her chair.
Night after night by candlelight
I cut her lover's name ;

Night after night so still and white
And like a ghost she came,
And sat beside me in her chair
And watched with eyes aflame.

She eyed each stroke,
And hardly stirred :
She never spoke
A single word :
And not a sound or murmur broke
The quiet save the mallet-stroke.

With still eyes ever on my hands,
With eyes that seemed to burn my hands,
My wincing over-wearied hands,
She watched with bloodless lips apart
And silent indrawn breath ;
And every stroke my chisel cut,
Death cut still deeper in her heart—
The two of us were chiselling
Together, I and death.

And when at length the job was done
And I had laid the mallet by,
As if at last her peace were won
She breathed his name, and with a sigh
Passed slowly through the open door,
And never crossed my threshold more.

Next night I laboured late, alone,
To cut her name too on the stone.

THE WIFE

THAT night she dreamt that he had died
As they were sleeping side by side,
And she awakened in affright
To think of him so cold and white ;
And when she turned her eyes to him
The tears of dream had made them dim,

And for a while she could not see
That he was sleeping quietly.
But as she saw him lying there,
The moonlight on his curly hair,
With happy face and quiet breath,
Although she thought no more of death,
And it was very good to rest
Her trembling hand on his calm breast
And feel the warm and breathing life,
And know that she was still his wife,
Yet in his bosom's easy stir
She felt a something trouble her,
And wept again, she knew not why,
And thought it would be good to die—
To sink into the deep sweet rest,
Her hand upon his quiet breast.

She slept, and when she woke again
A bird was at the window-pane,
A wild-eyed bird with wings of white
That fluttered in the cold moonlight,
As though for very fear of night,
And flapped the pane as if afraid :
Yet not a sound the white wings made.
Her eyes met those beseeching eyes,
And then she felt she needs must rise
To let the poor wild creature in
To find the rest it sought to win.
She rose and set the casement wide,
And caught the murmur of the tide,
And saw afar the mounded graves
About the church beside the waves—
The huddled headstones gleaming white
And ghostly in the cold moonlight.

The bird flew straightway to the bed
And hovered o'er her husband's head,
And circled thrice above his head,
Three times above his dreaming head :
And as she watched it flying round
She wondered that it made no sound,

And while she wondered it was gone ;
And cold and white the moonlight shone
Upon her husband lying there,
And turned to silver his gold hair,
And paled like death his ruddy face.
Then, creeping back into her place,
She lay beside him in the bed ;
But, if she closed her eyes, with dread
She saw the wild bird's eyes that burned
Through her shut eyelids, though she turned
Her blessings over in her heart
That peace might come ; and with a start,
If she but drowsed or dreamt of rest,
She felt that wild beak in her breast.
So, wearying for the time to rise,
She watched till dawn was in the skies.

Her husband woke ; yet not a word
She told him of the strange white bird :
But, as at breakfast-time she took
The pan of porridge from the crook
And all was ready to begin,
A neighbour gossip hurried in
And told the news that Phoebe Wright
Had died in childbirth in the night.
The husband neither spoke nor stirred,
But sat as one who, having heard,
May never hearken to a word
From any living lips again,
Who, heedless of the tongues of men,
Hears in a silence dread and deep
The dead folk talking in their sleep.
His porridge stood till it was cold ;
And as he sat his face grew old,
And all his yellow hair turned white
As it had looked to her last night
When it was drenched with cold moonlight.
And she knew all ; yet never said
A word to him about the dead,
Or pestered him to take his meat ;
But, sitting silent in her seat,

She left him quiet with his heart
To thoughts in which she had no part,
Until he rose to go about
His daily work and staggered out.
And all that day her eyes were dim
To think she'd borne no child to him.

Days passed : and then one evening late
As she came by the churchyard-gate
She saw him near the new-made grave ;
And with a lifted head and brave
She hurried home, lest he should know
That she had looked upon his woe.
And when they sat beside the fire,
Although it seemed he could not tire
Of gazing on the glowing coal,
And though a fire was in her soul,
She sat beside him with a smile,
Lest he should look on her the while
And wonder what could make her sad
When all the world but him was glad.
But not a word to her he said,
And silently they went to bed.

She never closed her eyes that night,
And she was stirring ere the light ;
And while her husband lay at rest
She left his side, and quickly dressed
And stole downstairs as though in fear
That he should chance to wake and hear.
And still the stars were burning bright
As she passed out into the night,
And all the dewy air was sweet
With flowers that grew about her feet,
Where he for her when they were wed
Had digged and sown a wallflower bed ;
And on the deep, rich, mellow scent
A gust of memories came and went,
As, dreaming of those old glad hours,
She stooped to pick a bunch of flowers
To lay upon the flowerless grave
That held his heart beside the wave.

Though like a troop of ghosts in white
The headstones watched in cold starlight,
As by the dead girl's grave she knelt
No fear in her full heart she felt,
But hurried home when she had laid
Her offering on the turf, afraid
That he should wake and find her gone ;
And still the stars in heaven shone
When into bed again she crept
And lay beside him where he slept.
And when day came upon his hair
The warm light fell, and young and fair
He looked again to her kind eyes,
That watched him till 'twas time to rise.

And every day as he went by
The churchyard-gate with downcast eye
He saw fresh flowers upon the grave
That held his heart beside the wave,
And wondering, he was glad to find
That any living soul was kind
To that dead girl who died the death
Of shame for his sake, and the breath
Of those fresh blooms to him was sweet
As he trudged home with laggard feet,
Still wondering who could be her friend.

He never knew until the end
When, in the churchyard by the wave,
He stood beside another grave,
And as the priest's last words were said
He turned, and lifting up his head
He saw the bunch of flowers was dead
Upon the dead girl's grave, and felt
The truth shoot through his heart and melt
The frost of icy bitterness,
And flood his heart with warm distress ;
And, kneeling by his dead wife's grave,
To her at last her hour he gave.

That night she dreamt he too had died
And they were sleeping side by side.

THE MACHINE

SINCE Thursday he'd been working overtime,
With only three short hours for food and sleep,
When no sleep came because of the dull beat
Of his fagged brain, and he could scarcely eat.
And now on Saturday when he was free,
And all his fellows hurried home to tea,
He was so dazed that he could hardly keep
His hands from going through the pantomime
Of keeping-even sheets in his machine—
The sleek machine that day and night,
Fed with paper virgin white,
Through those glaring, flaring hours
In the incandescent light
Printed children's picture-books—
Red and yellow, blue and green,
With sunny fields and running brooks,
Ships at sea and golden sands,
Queer white towns in Eastern lands,
Tossing palms on coral strands—
Until at times the clank and whirr and click,
And the shimmer of white paper turned him sick ;
And though at first the colours made him glad,
They soon were dancing in his brain like mad,
And kept on flaring through his burning head—
Now in a flash the workshop flaming red,
Now blazing green, now staring blue,
And then the yellow glow too well he knew—
Until the sleek machine with roar and glare
Began to take him in a dazzling snare,
When, fascinated, with a senseless stare
He felt himself drawn towards it till his hair
Was caught betwixt the rollers ; but his hand,
Almost before his brain could understand,
Had clutched the lever and the wheels were stopped
Just in the nick of time, though now he dropped
Half-senseless on the littered workshop floor ;
And he'd lain dazed a minute there or more
When his machine-girl helped him to a seat,
But soon again he was upon his feet

And tending that unsatisfied machine,
And printing pictures red and blue and green,
Until again the green and blue and red
Went jigging in a riot through his head ;
And wildest of the raging rout
The blinding, screeching, racking yellow,
A crazy devil of a fellow,
Over all the others seemed to shout.
For hands must not be idle when the year
Is getting through and Christmas drawing near,
With piles on piles of picture-books to print
For people who spend money without stint,
And while they're paying down their liberal gold
Guess little what is bought and what is sold.

But he at last was free till Monday, free
To sleep, to eat, to dream, to sulk, to walk,
To laugh, to sing, to whistle, or to talk. . . .
If only through his brain unceasingly
The wheels would not keep whirring, while the smell—
The oily smell of thick and sticky glaze—
Clung to his nostrils till 'twas hard to tell
If he were really out in the fresh air ;
And still before his eyes the blind white glare,
And then the colours dancing in his head,
A maddening maze of yellow, blue, and red.
So on he wandered in a kind of daze,
Too racked with sleeplessness to think of bed
Save as a hell where you must toss and toss,
With colours shooting in insane criss-cross
Before wide, prickling, gritty, sleepless eyes.

But, as he walked along the darkening street,
Too tired to rest and far too spent to eat,
The swish and patter of the passing feet,
The living human murmur and keen cries,
The deep cool shadows of the coming night
Surging about the jets of clustered light,
And the fresh breathing of the rain-washed air,
Brought something of sweet healing to his mind ;
And, though he trailed along as if half-blind,

Yet often on the pavement he would stop-
To gaze at goods displayed within a shop,
And wonder in a dull and lifeless way
What they had cost and who'd the price to pay.
But those two kinds of shop which as a boy
Had been to him a never-failing joy,
The bookshop and the fruitshop, he passed by
As if their colours seared his wincing eye,
For still he feared the yellow, blue, and red
Would start that devils' dancing in his head.

And soon through throngs of people, almost gay
To be let loose from work, he pushed his way ;
And ripples of their careless laughter stole
Like waves of cooling water through his soul ;
While sometimes he would lift his aching eyes
And see a child's face flushed with proud surprise,
As, gripping both its parent's hands quite tight,
It found itself in fairylands of light,
Walking with grown-up people through the night :
Then, turning, with a shudder he would see
Poor painted faces leering frightfully,
And so drop back from heaven again to hell.

And then somehow, though how he could not tell,
He found that he was walking through the throng
Quite happy with a young girl at his side—
A young girl apple-cheeked and eager-eyed ;
And her frank, friendly chatter seemed a song
To him who ne'er till now had heard life sing ;
And youth within him kindled quick and strong
As he drank in that careless chattering.
She told him how just lately she had come
From some far Northern isle to earn her bread ;
And in a stuffy office all day long
In shiny ledgers, with a splitting head,
She added dazzling figures till they danced
And tied themselves in wriggling knots and pranced
And scrambled helter-skelter o'er the page ;
And though it seemed already quite an age

Since she had left her home, from end to end
Of this big town she had not any friend :
At times she almost dreaded she'd go dumb
With not a soul to speak to—for at home
In her own Island she knew every one. . . .
No strangers there—save when the tinkers came
With pots and pans aglinting in the sun—
You saw the tin far off like glancing flame
As all about the Island they would roam. . . .
Then, of themselves at home, there were six brothers,
Five sisters, with herself, besides the others—
Two homeless bairns whom, having lost their mothers,
Her mother'd taken in among her own. . . .
And she in all her life had hardly known
Her mother with no baby at her breast—
She'd always sing to hush them all to sleep,
And sang too for the dancing, sang to keep
The feet in time and tune, and still sang best,
Clean best of all the singers of the Isle.
And as she talked of home he saw her smile
With happy far-off gaze, and then, as though
In wonder how she'd come to chatter so
To this pale grave-eyed boy, she paused, half-shy,
And then she laughed with laughter clear and true,
And looked into his eyes and he laughed too,
And they were happy, hardly knowing why.

And now he told her of his life and how
He too had been nigh friendless until now :
And soon he talked to her about his work,
But as he spoke of it, as with a jerk
The light dropped from his eyes. He seemed to slip
Once more in the machine's relentless grip,
And hear again the clank and whirr and click,
And see the dancing colours and the glare,
Until his dizzy brain again turned sick ;
And, seeing him look round with vacant air,
Fierce pity cut her to the very quick ;
And as her eyes with keen distress were filled
She touched his hand, and soon her kind touch stilled
The agony ; and so, to bring him ease,
She told more of that Isle in Northern seas

Where she was born and of the folk at home—
And how all night you heard the wash of foam. . . .
Sometimes on stormy nights against the pane
The sousing spray would rattle just like rain,
And oft the high-tides scoured the threshold clean. . . .

And as she talked he saw the sea-light glint
In her dark eyes—and then the sleek machine
Lost hold on him at last and ceased to print :
And in his eyes there sprang a kindred light
As hand in hand they wandered through the night.

THE LODESTAR

FROM hag to hag o'er miles of quaking moss,
Benighted in an unknown countryside
Among gaunt hills, the stars my only guide,
Bewildered by peat-waters black and deep,
Wherein the mocking stars swam, at a loss
Which way to turn for shelter from the night,
I struggled on until, my head grown light
From utter weariness, I almost sank
To rest among the tussocks soft and dank,
Drowsing half-dazed and murmuring it were best
To stray no further, but to lie at rest
Beneath the cold white stars for evermore—
When suddenly I came across
A runnel oozing from the moss,
And knew that if I followed where it led
'Twould bring me to a valley in the end
Where there'd be houses and perhaps a bed.

And so the little runnel was my friend,
And as I walked beside its path at first
It kept a friendly silence, then it burst
Into a friendly singing as it rambled
Among big boulders down a craggy steep.
'Mid bracken nigh breast-deep
Through which I scrambled,

Half-blind and numb for sleep,
Until it seemed that I could strive no more :
When, startled by a startled sheep,
Looking up, I saw a track—
A stony trackway dimly white
Disappearing in the night
Across a waste of heather burnt and black ;
And so I took it, mumbling o'er and o'er
In witlessness of weariness
And featherheaded foolishness—
A track must lead at some time to a door.

And trudging to this senseless tune
That kept on drumming in my head,
I followed where the pathway led ;
But all too soon
It left the ling and nigh was lost
Among the bent that glimmered grey
About my sore-bewildered way,
But when at length it crossed
A brawling burn, I saw afar
A cottage window light,
A star, but no cold heavenly star,
A warm red star of welcome in the night.
Far off it burned upon the black hillside,
Sole star of earth in all that waste so wide—
A little human lanthorn in the night,
Yet more to me than all the bright
Unfriendly stars of heaven so cold and white.

And as it dimly shone,
Though towards it I could only go
With stumbling step and slow,
It quickened in my heart a kindred glow,
And seemed to draw me on
That last rough mile or so,
Now seen, now hidden when the track
Dipped down into a slack,
And all the earth again was black ;
And from the unseen fern,
Grey ghost of all bewildered things,
An owl brushed by me on unrustling wings,

And gave me quite a turn
And sent a shiver through my hair.

Then again more fair
Flashed the friendly light,
Beckoning through the night,
A golden glowing square,
Growing big and clearer
As I drew slowly nearer
With eager stumbling feet,
And snuffed the homely reek of peat,
And saw above me, lone and high,
A cottage dark against the sky—
A candle shining on the window-sill.

With thankful heart I climbed the hill
And stood at last before
The dark and unknown door,
Wondering if food and shelter lay behind,
And what the welcome I should find,
Whether kindly or unkind ;
But I had scarcely knocked to learn my fate
When the latch lifted and the door swung wide
On creaking hinges, and I saw inside
A frail old woman very worn and white,
Her body all atremble in the light,
Who gazed with strange still eyes into the night
As though she did not see me, but looked straight
Beyond me to some unforgotten past ;
And I was startled when she said at last
With strange still voice : *You're welcome, though you're late.*

And then an old man, nodding in a chair
Beside the fire, awoke with sleepy stare,
And rose in haste and led her to her seat
Beside the cosy hearth of glowing peat,
And muttered to me, as he took her hand :
*It's queer, it's queer that she to-night should stand
Who has not stood alone for fifteen year.
Though I heard nothing, she was quick to hear.
I must have dozed, but she has been awake
And listening for your footstep since daybreak :*

*For she was certain you would come to-day—
 Ay, she was sure, for all that I could say ;
 Talk as I might, she would not go to bed
 Till you should come. Your supper has been spread
 This long while : you'll be ready for your meat.*
 With that he beckoned me to take a seat
 Before the table, lifting from the crook
 The singing kettle ; while with far-off look,
 As though she neither saw nor heard,
 His wife sat gazing at the glowing peat.

So, wondering sorely, I sat down to eat ;
 And yet she neither spoke nor stirred,
 But in her high-backed chair sat bolt-upright
 With still grey eyes and tumbled hair, as white
 As fairy-cotton, straggling o'er her brow
 And hung in wisps about her wasted cheek.
 But when I'd finished and drawn near the fire
 She suddenly turned round to speak,
 Her old eyes kindling with a tense desire.
 Her words came tremblingly : *You'll tell me now
 What news you bring of him, my son ?* Amazed
 I met that searching and love-famished look ;
 And then the old man, seeing I looked dazed,
 Made shift to swing aside the kettle-crook,
 And muttered in my ear :
John Netherton, his name.—And, as I gazed
 Into the peat that broke in clear blue flame,
 Remembrance flashed upon me with the name,
 And I slipped back in memory twenty-year—
 Back to the fo'c'sle of a villainous boat ;
 And once again in that hot hell I lay
 Watching the smoky lanthorn duck and sway,
 As though in steamy stench it kept afloat . . .
 The fiery fangs of fever at my throat,
 And my poor broken arm, ill-set,
 A bar of white-hot iron at my side :
 And as I lay with staring eyes pricked wide
 Throughout eternities of agony
 I saw a big black shadow stoop o'er me,
 And felt a cool hand touch my brow and wet

My cracking lips, and sank in healing sleep ;
And when I rose from that unfathomed deep
I saw the youngest of that rascal crew
Beside my bunk, and heard his name, and knew
'Twas he who'd brought me ease : but soon ashore
We parted, and I never saw him more,
Though some while after in another place
I heard he'd perished in a drunken brawl.

And now the old man touched me, to recall
My wandering thoughts, and breathed again the name ;
And I looked up into the mother's face
That burned before me with grey eyes aflame.
And so I told her how I'd met her son,
And of the kindly things that he had done :
And as I spoke her quivering spirit drank
The news that it had thirsted for so long,
And for a flashing moment gay and strong
Life flamed in her old eyes, then slowly sank.
And he was happy when you saw him last ?
She asked, and I was glad to answer—*Yes*.
Then all sat dreaming without stir or sound
As gradually she sank into the past
With eyes that looked beyond all happiness,
Beyond all earthly trouble and distress,
Into some other world than ours. The thread
That long had held the straining life earthbound
Was loosed at last : her eyes grew dark : her head
Drooped slowly on her breast, and she was dead.

The old man at her side spoke not a word
As we arose and bore her to her bed,
And laid her on the clean white quilt to rest
With calm hands folded on her quiet breast :
And, hour by hour, he hardly even stirred,
Crouching beside me in the ingle-seat
And staring, staring at the still red glow :
But, when the fire was burning low
And he arose to bring fresh peat,
He muttered with dull voice and slow :
This fire has not burned out through all these years,

*Not since the hearthstone first was set—
 And that is nigh two hundred years ago.
 My father's father built this house, and I . . .
 I thought my son . . . and then he gave a sigh,
 And as he stooped his wizened cheek was wet
 With slowly trickling tears.
 And now we hearkened while an owl's keen cry
 Sang through the silence as it fluttered nigh
 The cottage window, dazzled by the light,
 Then back, with fainter hootings, into night.*

But when the fresh peats broke into a blaze
 He watched it with a steady dry-eyed gaze,
 And spoke once more : *And he, dead too !
 You did not tell her, but I knew . . . I knew !*

And now came all the tale of their distress—
 Their only son in wanton waywardness
 Had left them nearly thirty years ago,
 And they had never had a word from him
 In all that time. . . . The reckless blow
 Of his unkindness struck his mother low. . . .
 Her hair, as ruddy as the fern
 In late September by a moorland burn,
 Had shrivelled rimy-white
 In one short summer's night :
 And they had looked and looked for his return. . . .
 His mother set for him at every meal
 And kept his bed well aired . . . the knife and fork
 I'd used were Jim's . . . but as all hope grew dim
 She sickened, dwindling feebler every day,
 Though, when it seemed that she must pass away,
 She grew more confident that, ere she passed,
 A stranger would bring news to her at last
 Of her lost son. *And when I woke in bed
 Beside her as the dawn was burning red,
 She turned to me with sleepless eyes and said :
 " The news will come to-day."*

He spoke no more ; and silent in my seat
 With burning eyes upon the burning peat

I pondered on the strangest of strange things
That had befallen in my vagrant life,
And how at last my idle wanderings
Had brought me to this old man and his wife :
And as I brooded o'er the blaze,
I thought with awe of that steadfast desire
Which, unto me unknown,
Had drawn me through long years by such strange ways
From that dark fo'c'sle to this cottage fire.

And now, at last, quite spent I fell asleep
And slumbered long and deep ;
And when I waked the peat was smouldering white
Upon the white hearthstone ;
And over heath and bent dawn kindled bright
Beyond dark ridges in a rosy fleece,
While from the little window morning light
Fell on her face, made holy with the peace
That passeth understanding, and was shed
In tender beams upon the low-bowed head
Of that old man forlorn beside the bed.

FLANNAN ISLE

*THOUGH three men dwell on Flannan Isle
To keep the lamp alight,
As we steered under the lee we caught
No glimmer through the night.*

A passing ship at dawn had brought
The news, and quickly we set sail
To find out what strange thing might ail
The keepers of the deep-sea light.

The winter day broke blue and bright
With glancing sun and glancing spray
While o'er the swell our boat made way,
As gallant as a gull in flight.

But as we neared the lonely Isle
And looked up at the naked height,
And saw the lighthouse towering white
With blinded lantern that all night
Had never shot a spark
Of comfort through the dark,
So ghostly in the cold sunlight
It seemed that we were struck the while
With wonder all too dread for words.
And, as into the tiny creek
We stole, beneath the hanging crag
We saw three queer black ugly birds—
Too big by far in my belief
For cormorant or shag—
Like seamen sitting bolt-upright
Upon a half-tide reef :
But as we neared they plunged from sight
Without a sound or spirt of white.

And still too mazed to speak,
We landed and made fast the boat
And climbed the track in single file,
Each wishing he were safe afloat
On any sea, however far,
So it be far from Flannan Isle :
And still we seemed to climb and climb
As though we'd lost all count of time
And so must climb for evermore ;
Yet all too soon we reached the door—
The black sun-blistered lighthouse door
That gaped for us ajar.

As on the threshold for a spell
We paused, we seemed to breathe the smell
Of limewash and of tar,
Familiar as our daily breath,
As though 'twere some strange scent of death ;
And so yet wondering side by side
We stood a moment still tongue-tied,
And each with black foreboding eyed
The door ere we should fling it wide

To leave the sunlight for the gloom :
Till, plucking courage up, at last
Hard on each other's heels we passed
Into the living-room.

Yet as we crowded through the door
We only saw a table spread
For dinner, meat and cheese and bread,
But all untouched and no one there ;
As though when they sat down to eat,
Ere they could even taste,
Alarm had come and they in haste
Had risen and left the bread and meat,
For at the table-head a chair
Lay tumbled on the floor.

We listened, but we only heard
The feeble cheeping of a bird
That starved upon its perch ;
And, listening still, without a word
We set about our hopeless search.
We hunted high, we hunted low,
And soon ransacked the empty house ;
Then o'er the Island to and fro
We ranged, to listen and to look
In every cranny, cleft or nook
That might have hid a bird or mouse :
But though we searched from shore to shore
We found no sign in any place,
And soon again stood face to face
Before the gaping door,
And stole into the room once more
As frightened children steal.
Ay, though we hunted high and low
And hunted everywhere,
Of the three men's fate we found no trace
Of any kind in any place
But a door ajar and an untouched meal
And an overtoppled chair.

And as we listened in the gloom
Of that forsaken living-room—

A chill clutch on our breath—
We thought how ill-chance came to all
Who kept the Flannan Light,
And how the rock had been the death
Of many a likely lad—
How six had come to a sudden end
And three had gone stark mad,
And one, whom we'd all known as friend,
Had leapt from the lantern one still night
And fallen dead by the lighthouse wall—
And long we thought
On the three we sought,
And on what might yet befall.

Like curs a glance has brought to heel
We listened, flinching there,
And looked and looked on the untouched meal
And the overtoppled chair.

We seemed to stand for an endless while,
Though still no word was said,
Three men alive on Flannan Isle
Who thought on three men dead.

THE SHOP

TIN-TINKLE-TINKLE-TINKLE went the bell
As I pushed in, and, once again, the smell
Of groceries and news-sheets freshly printed
That always greeted me when I looked in
To buy my evening-paper : but to-night
I wondered not to see the well-known face
With kind brown eyes and ever-friendly smile
Behind the counter, and to find the place
Deserted at this hour, and not a light
In either window. Waiting there a while,
Though wondering at what change these changes hinted,
I yet was grateful for the quiet gloom—
Lit only by a gleam from the back-room,
And here and there a glint of glass or tin—
So pleasant after all the flare and din

And hubbub of the foundry ; and my eyes,
Still tingling from the smoke, were glad to rest
Upon the ordered shelves, so neatly dressed
That even in the dusk they seemed to tell
No little of the hand that kept them clean,
And of the head that sorted things so well
That naught of waste or worry could be seen,
But all kept sweet with ever-fresh supplies.
And as I thought upon her quiet way,
Wondering what could have got her that she'd left
The shop unlit, untended and bereft
Of her kind presence, overhead I heard
A tiptoe creak as though somebody stirred
With careful step across the upper floor ;
Then all was silent till the back-room door
Swung open and her husband hurried in.
He feared he'd kept me waiting in the dark,
And he was sorry ; but his wife, who served
The customers at night-time usually,
While he made up the ledger after tea,
Was busy when I . . . Well, to tell the truth,
They were in trouble, for their little son
Had come in ill from school . . . the doctor said
Pneumonia. . . . They'd been putting him to bed :
Perhaps I heard them moving overhead,
For boards would creak and creak, for all your care.
They hoped the best, for he was young, and youth
Could come through much ; and all that could be done
Would be . . . Then he stood, listening, quite unnerved,
As though he heard a footstep on the stair,
Though I heard nothing : but at my remark
About the fog and sleet he turned
And answered quickly as there burned
In his brown eyes an eager flame :
The raw and damp were much to blame :
If but his son might breathe West-country air !
A certain Cornish village he could name
Was just the place—if he could send him there,
And only for a week, he'd come back stronger. . . .
And then again he listened ; and I took
My paper and went, afraid to keep him longer,
And left him standing with that haggard look.

Next night as I pushed in there was no tinkle
 And, glancing up, I saw the bell was gone,
 Although in either window the gas shone,
 And I was greeted by a cheery twinkle
 Of burnished tins and bottles from the shelves :
 And now I saw the father busy there
 Behind the counter, cutting with a string
 A bar of soap up for a customer,
 With weary eyes and jerky harassed air
 As if his mind were hardly on the task ;
 And when 'twas done and parcelled up for her
 And she had gone, he turned to me and said—
 He thought that folk might cut their soap themselves. . . .
 'Twas nothing much . . . but any little thing
 At such a time . . . And having little doubt
 The boy was worse I did not like to ask,
 So picked my paper up and hurried out.
 And all next day amid the glare and clang
 And clatter of the workshop his words rang,
 And kept on ringing, in my head a-ring—
But any little thing . . . at such a time . . .
 And kept on chiming to the anvil's chime—
But any little thing . . . at such a time . . .
 And they were hissed and sputtered in the sizzle
 Of water on hot iron—*little thing . . .*
At such a time : and when I left at last
 The smoke and steam and walked through the cold drizzle,
 The lumbering of the buses as they passed
 Seemed full of it, and to the passing feet
 The words kept patter, patter with dull beat.

I almost feared to turn into their street
 Lest I should find the blinds down in the shop ;
 And more than once I'd half-a-mind to stop
 And buy my paper from the yelling boys,
 Who darted all about with such a noise
 That I half-wondered in a foolish way
 How they could shriek so, knowing that the sound
 Must worry children lying ill in bed. . . .
 Then, thinking even they must earn their bread
 As I earned mine, and scarce as noisily !
 I wandered on, and very soon I found

I'd followed where my thoughts had been all day,
And stood before the shop, relieved to see
The gases burning, and no down-drawn blind
Of blank foreboding. With an easier mind
I entered slowly, and was glad to find
The father by the counter 'waiting me
With paper ready and a cheery face.
Yes! Yes! the boy was better—took the turn
Last night just after I had left the place.
He feared that he'd been short and cross last night . . .
But when a little child was suffering
It worried you, and any little thing
At such a moment made you cut up rough :
Though now that he was going on all right—
Well, he'd have patience now to be polite !
And, soon as ever he was well enough,
The boy should go to Cornwall for a change—
Should go to his own home, for he himself
Was Cornish, born and bred, his wife as well ;
And still his parents lived at the old place—
A little place as snug as snug could be . . .
Where apple-blossom dipped into the sea. . . .
Perhaps to strangers' ears that sounded strange,
But not to any Cornishman who knew
How sea and land ran up into each other,
And how all round each wide blue estuary
The flowers were blooming to the water's edge :
You'd come on bluebells like a sea of blue . . .
But they would not be out for some while yet—
'Twould be primroses blowing everywhere,
Primroses and primroses and primroses. . . .
You'd never half-know what primroses were
Unless you'd seen them growing in the West,
But, having seen, would never more forget.
Why, every bank and every lane and hedge
Was just one blaze of yellow, and the smell
When the sun shone upon them after wet ! . . .
And his eyes sparkled as he turned to sell
A penny loaf and half-an-ounce of tea
To a poor child who waited patiently
With hacking cough that tore her hollow chest :
And as she went out, clutching tight the change,

He muttered to himself : *It's strange, it's strange*^a
That little ones should suffer so ! The light
 Had left his eyes, but when he turned to me
 I saw a flame leap in them hot and bright.
I'd like to take them all, he said, *to-night !*

And in the workshop all through the next day
 The anvils had another tune to play—
Primroses and primroses and primroses !
 The bellows puffing out : *It's strange, it's strange*
That little ones should suffer so. . . .
 And now my hammer at a blow—
I'd like to take them all to-night !
 And in the clouds of steam and white-hot glow
 I seemed to see primroses everywhere,
 Primroses and primroses and primroses.

And each night after that I heard the boy
 Was mending quickly and would soon be well,
 Till one night I was startled by the bell—
Tin-tinkle-tinkle-tinkle, loud and clear,
 And tried to hush it lest the lad should hear.
 But, when the father saw me clutch the thing,
 He said the boy had missed it yesterday
 And wondered why he could not hear it ring,
 And wanted it, and had to have his way.
 And then with brown eyes burning with deep joy
 Told me his son was going to the West—
 Was going home . . . the doctor thought next week
 He'd be quite well enough : the way was long,
 But trains were quick and he would soon be there ;
 And on the journey he'd have every care,
 His mother being with him. . . . It was best
 That she should go, for he would find it strange,
 The little chap, at first. She needed change . . .
 And when they'd had a whiff of Western air
 'Twould cost a deal, and there was naught to spare :
 But what was money if you hadn't health ?
 And what more could you buy if you'd the wealth. . . .
 Yes, 'twould be lonely for himself and rough,
 Though on the whole he'd manage well enough :

He'd have a lot to do, and there was naught
Like work to keep folk cheerful : when the hand
Was busy you had little time for thought,
And thinking was the mischief. And 'twas grand
To know that they'd be happy. Then the bell
Went *tinkle-tinkle*, and he turned to sell.

One night he greeted me with face that shone,
Although the eyes were wistful : they were gone—
Had gone that morning, he was glad to say ;
And, though 'twas sore work setting them away,
Still 'twas the best for them . . . and they would be
Already in the cottage by the sea. . . .
He spoke no more of them, but turned his head
And said he wondered if the price of bread . . .
And as I went again into the night
I saw his eyes were glistening in the light.

And two nights after that he'd had a letter,
And all was well : the boy was keeping better
And was as happy as a child could be
All day with the primroses and the sea—
And pigs ! Of all the wonders of the West,
His mother wrote, he liked the pigs the best.
And now the father laughed until the tears
Were in his eyes, and chuckled—ay, he knew !
Had he not been a boy there once himself ?
He'd liked pigs too when he was his son's years.
And then he reached a half-loaf from the shelf
And twisted up a farthing's worth of tea
And a farthing's worth of sugar for the child,
The same poor child who waited patiently,
Still shaken by a hacking, racking cough.

And all next day the anvils rang with jigs :
The bellows roared and rumbled with loud laughter
Until it seemed the workshop had gone wild,
And it would echo, echo ever after
The tune the hammers tinkled on and off—
A silly tune of primroses and pigs. . . .
Of all the wonders of the West
He liked the pigs, he liked the pigs the best !

Next night as I went in I caught
A strange fresh smell. The postman had just brought
A precious box from Cornwall, and the shop
Was lit with primroses that lay atop
A Cornish pasty and a pot of cream ;
And as with gentle hands the father lifted
The flowers his little son had plucked for him,
He stood a moment in a far-off dream,
As though in glad remembrances he drifted
On Western seas, and as his eyes grew dim
He stooped and buried them in deep sweet bloom ;
Till, hearing once again the poor child's cough,
He served her hurriedly and sent her off
Quite happily with thin hands filled with flowers.
And as I followed to the street the gloom
Was starred with primroses, and many hours
The strange shy flickering surprise
Of that child's keen enchanted eyes
Lit up my heart and brightened my dull room.

Then many nights the foundry kept me late
With overtime, and I was much too tired
To go round by the shop, but made for bed
As straight as I could go ; until one night
We'd left off earlier, though 'twas after eight,
I thought I'd like some news about the boy.
I found the shop untended, and the bell
Tin-tinkled-tinkled-tinkled all in vain :
And then I saw through the half-curtained pane
The back-room was a very blaze of joy ;
And knew the mother and son had come safe back.
And as I slipped away, now all was well,
I heard the boy shriek out in shrill delight :
And, father, all the little pigs were black !

THE BROTHERS

ALL morning they had quarrelled as they worked,
A little off their fellows, in the pit :
Dick growled at Robert ; Robert said Dick shirked ;
And when the roof, dropt more than they had reckoned

Began to crack and split,
Though each rushed like a shot to set
The pit-props in their places,
Each said the other was to blame
When, all secure, with flushed and grimy faces
They faced each other for a second :
All morning they had quarrelled, yet
Neither had named her name.

Again they turned to work,
And in the dusty murk
Of that black gallery,
Which ran out three miles underneath the sea,
There was no sound at all
Save whispering creak of roof and wall
And crack of coal and tap of pick,
And now and then a rattling fall,
While Robert worked on steadily, but Dick
In fits and starts, with teeth clenched tight
And dark eyes flashing in his lamp's dull light.

And when he paused, nigh spent, to wipe the sweat
From off his dripping brow, and Robert turned
To fling some idle jibe at him, the spark
Of anger smouldering in him flared and burned,
Though all his body quivered, wringing-wet,
Till that black hole
To him blazed red
As if the very coal
Had kindled underfoot and overhead :
Then gripping tight his pick
He rushed upon his brother,
But Robert, turning quick,
Leapt up, and now they faced each other.

They faced each other—Dick with arm upraised
In act to strike, and murder in his eyes . . .
When suddenly with noise of thunder
The earth shook round them, rumbling over and under ;
And Dick saw Robert lying at his feet,
As close behind the gallery crashed in,
And almost at his heel earth gaped asunder.

By black disaster dazed,
His wrath died, and he dropped his pick
And staggered dizzily and terror-sick :
But when the dust and din
Had settled to a stillness dread as death,
And he once more could draw his breath,
He gave a little joyous shout
To find the lamps had not gone out.

And on his knees he fell
Beside his brother buried in black dust,
And, full of tense misgiving,
He lifted him and thrust
A knee beneath his head and cleared
The dust from mouth and nose, but could not tell
Awhile if he were dead or living.
Too fearful to know what he feared,
He fumbled at the open shirt
And felt till he could feel the heart
Still beating with a feeble beat,
And then he saw the closed lids part
And saw the nostrils quiver,
And knew his brother lived, though sorely hurt.

Again he staggered to his feet,
And fetched his water-can and wet
The ashy lips and bathed the brow,
Until his brother sat up with a shiver
And gazed before him with a senseless stare
And dull eyes strangely set.
Too well Dick knew that now
They must not linger there,
Cut off from all their mates, to be o'ertaken
In less than no time by the deadly damp ;
So, picking up his lamp,
He made his brother rise,
Then took him by the arm
And shook him till he'd shaken
An inkling of the danger and alarm
Into those dull, still eyes,
Then dragged him and half-carried him in haste
To reach the airway where 'twould still be sweet

When all the gallery was foul with gas ;
But, soon as they had reached it, they were faced
By a big fall of roof they could not pass,
And found themselves cut off from all retreat
On every hand by that black shining wall,
With naught to do but sit and wait
Till rescue came, if rescue came at all
And did not come too late.
And in the fresher airway light came back
To Robert's eyes, although he never spoke,
And not a sound the deathly silence broke
As they sat staring at that wall of black—
As in the glimmer of the dusky lamp
They sat and wondered, wondered if the damp—
The stealthy after-damp that, creeping, creeping,
Takes strong lads by the throat and drops them sleeping,
To wake no more for any woman's weeping—
Would steal upon them ere the rescue came . . .
And if the rescuers would find them sitting,
Would find them squatted on their hunkers, cold. . . .
Then as they sat and wondered, like a flame
One thought burned up both hearts—
Still neither breathed her name.

And now their thoughts dropped back into the pit,
And through the league-long galleries went flitting
With speed no fall could hold :
They wondered how their mates had fared—
If they'd been struck stone-dead,
Or if they shared
Like fate with them, or reached the shaft
Unhurt and only scared
Before disaster overtook them :
And then, although their courage ne'er forsook them,
They wondered once again if they must sit
Awaiting death . . . but knowing well
That even for a while to dwell
On such-like thoughts will drive a strong man daft,
They shook themselves until their thoughts ran free
Along the drift and clambered in the cage,
And in a trice were shooting up the shaft.
But when their thoughts had come to the pithead,

And found the fearful people gathered there
 Beneath the noonday sun,
 Bright-eyed with terror, blinded by despair,
 Dick rose and with his chalk wrote on the wall
 This message for his folk :
We can't get any farther—12, noonday—
 And signed both names ; and when he'd done,
 Though neither of them spoke,
 They both felt easier in a way
 Now that they'd left a word,
 Though nothing but a scrawl.

And silent still they sat
 And never stirred :
 And Dick's thoughts dwelt on this and that—
 How, far above their heads upon the sea
 The sun was shining merrily,
 And in its golden glancing
 The windy waves were dancing ;
 And how he'd slipped that morning on his way ;
 And how on Friday when he drew his pay
 He'd buy a blanket for his whippet, Nell—
 He felt dead certain she would win the race
 On Saturday . . . though you could never tell,
 There were such odds against her . . . but his face
 Lit up as though even now he saw her run—
 A little slip of lightning in the sun :
 While Robert's thoughts were ever on the match
 His team was booked to play on Saturday—
 He placed the field and settled who should play
 In Will Burn's stead ; for Will he had a doubt
 Was scarcely up to form, although . . .

Just then the lamp went slowly out.

Still neither stirred
 Nor spoke a word
 Though either's breath came quickly, with a catch.

And now again one thought
 Set both their hearts afire—

In one fierce flame
Of quick desire,
Though neither breathed her name.

Then Dick stretched out his hand and caught
His brother's arm, and whispered in his ear :
Bob, lad, there's naught to fear . . .
And when we're out, lad, you and she shall wed.
Bob gripped Dick's hand ; and then no more was said
As slowly all about them rose
The deadly after-damp ; but close
They sat together hand in hand.
Then their minds wandered—and Dick seemed to stand
And shout till he was hoarse
To speed his winning whippet down the course . . .
And Robert, with the ball
Secure within his oxters, charged ahead
Straight for the goal, and none could hold,
Though many tried a fall.

Then dreaming they were lucky boys in bed
Once more and lying snugly by each other,
Dick, with his arms clasped tight about his brother,
Whispered with failing breath
Into the ear of death :
Come, Robert, cuddle closer, lad—it's cold.

THE BLIND ROWER

AND since he rowed his father home
His hand has never touched an oar.
All day he wanders by the shore
And hearkens to the swish of foam.
Though blind from birth, he still could row
As well as any lad with sight,
And knew strange things that none may know
Save those who live without the light.

When they put out that summer eve
To sink the lobster-pots at sea

The sun was crimson in the sky,
And not a breath was in the sky,
The brooding thunder-laden sky
That heavily and wearily
Weighed down upon the waveless sea
That scarcely seemed to heave.

The pots were safely sunk, and then
The father gave the word for home :
He took the tiller in his hand,
And, in his heart already home,
He brought her nose round towards the land
To steer her straight for home.

He never spoke
Nor stirred again—
A sudden stroke,
And he lay dead
With staring eyes and lips of lead.

The son rowed on and nothing feared,
And sometimes merrily
He lifted up his voice and sang
Both high and low
And loud and sweet—
For he was ever gay at sea
And ever glad to row,
And rowed as only blind men row :
And little did the blind lad know
That death was at his feet ;
For still he thought his father steered,
Nor knew that he was all alone
With death upon the open sea :
And strangely on the silence rang
That lonely melody,
As through the livid brooding gloom
By rock and reef he rowed for home—
The blind man rowed the dead man home.

But as they neared the shore
He rested on his oar,

And, wondering that his father kept
So very quiet in the stern,
He laughed and asked him if he slept
And vowed he heard him snore just now.
Though when his father spoke no word
A sudden fear upon him came,
And, crying on his father's name,
With flinching heart he heard
The water lapping on the shore,
And all his blood ran cold to feel
The shingle grate beneath the keel,
And, stretching over towards the stern,
His knuckle touched the dead man's brow.

But help was near at hand
And he came safe to land,
Though none has ever known
How he rowed in alone
And never touched a reef.
Some say they saw the dead man steer—
The dead man steer the blind man home,
Though when they found him dead
His hand was cold as lead.

So ever restless to and fro,
In every sort of weather,
The blind lad wanders on the shore
And hearkens to the foam.
His hand has never touched an oar
Since they came home together—
The blind who rowed his dead sire home—
The dead who steered his blind son home.

THE FLUTE

GOOD-NIGHT! he sang out cheerily—
Good-night!—and yet again—*Good-night!*

And I was gay that night to be
Once more in my clean countryside
Among the windy hills and wide.

Six days of city slush and mud,
Of hooting horn and spattering wheel,
Made me rejoice again to feel
The tingling frost that fires the blood
And sets life burning keen and bright,
And down the ringing road to stride
The eager swinging stride that braces
The straining thews from hip to heel,
To breathe again the wind that sweeps
Across the grassy Northern steeps
From crystal deeps and starry spaces.

And I was glad again to hear
The old man's greeting of good cheer :
For every night for many a year
At that same corner we had met,
Summer and winter, dry and wet ;
And though I never once had heard
The old man speak another word,
His cheery greeting at the bend
Seemed like the welcome of a friend.

But as we neared to-night somehow
I felt that he would stop and speak—
Though he went by—and when I turned
I saw him standing in the road,
And looking back with hand to brow,
As if to shade old eyes grown weak
Awaiting the long sleep they'd earned,
Though, as again towards him I strode,
A friendly light within them burned.

And then as I drew nigh he spoke
With shaking head and voice that broke :
*I've missed you these last nights, he said,
And I have not so many now
That I can miss friends easily. . . .
Ay, friends grow scarce as you grow old,
And roads are rough and winds are cold,
And when you feel you're growing old
Life doesn't go too merrily.*

And then he stood with nodding head
And spoke no more. And so I told
How I had been six days and nights
Exiled from pleasant sounds and sights ;
And now, as though my voice had stirred
His heart to speech, he told right out
With quickening eye and quavering word
The things I care to hear about,
The little things that make up life—
How he'd been lonesome since his wife
Had died some thirty years ago ;
And how he trudged three mile or so
To reach the farmstead where he worked,
And three mile back to his own door . . .
For he lived outby on the moor ;
And every day the distance irked
More sorely still his poor old bones,
And all the road seemed strewn with stones
To trip you up when you were old,
When you were old and friends were few ;
How, since the farmstead had been sold,
The master and the men were new,
All save himself, and they were young,
And mistress had a raspy tongue ;
So often he would hardly speak
A friendly word from week to week
With any soul. Old friends had died
Or else had quit the countryside,
And since his wife was taken he
Had lived alone this thirty year :
And there were few who cared to hear
An old man's jabber . . . and too long
He'd kept me standing in the cold
With his long tongue and such a song
About himself ! And I would be . . .

I put my arm through his and turned
To go upon his way with him ;
And once again the warm light burned
In those old eyes so weak and dim,
When with weak piping voice he told
How much it meant to him each night

To change a kindly word with me,
To think that he'd at least one friend
Who'd happen miss him in the end.

Then as we walked he said no more ;
And silent in the starry light
Across the wide sweet-smelling bent
Between the grass and stars we went
In quiet friendly company ;
And all the way we only heard
A chirrup where some partridge stirred
And ran before us through the grass
To hide his head till we should pass.
At length we reached the cottage door ;
But when I stopped and turned to go
His words came tremblingly and slow—
If I would step inside and rest
I'd be right welcome : not a guest
Had crossed his threshold thirty year . . .
He'd naught but bread and cheese and beer
To offer me . . . but I'd know best . . .

He spoke with hand upon the latch,
And, when I answered, opened wide
The cottage door and stepped inside,
And as I followed struck a match
And lit a tallow-dip, and stirred
The banked-up peats into a glow ;
And then with shuffling step and slow
He moved about and soon had set
Two mugs of beer and bread and cheese :
And while we made a meal off these
The old man never spoke a word,
But brooding in the ingle-seat
With eyes upon the kindling peat
He seemed awhile to quite forget
He was not sitting by himself
To-night like any other night ;
When as in the dim candle-light
I glanced about me, with surprise
I saw on the low rafter-shelf
A flûte, nigh hidden in the shade.

And when I asked him if he played
The light came back into his eyes :
Ay, ay, he sometimes played a bit,
But not so often since she died.
And then, as though old memories lit
His poor old heart and made it glad,
He told how he when quite a lad
Had taught himself—and they would play
On penny whistles all the day,
He and the miller's son beside
The millpool, chirping all they knew
Till they could whistle clean and true ;
And how, when old enough to earn,
They'd both saved up to buy a flute,
And they had played it turn by turn :
But Jake was dead this long while back. . . .
Ah ! If I'd only heard him toot
I'd know what music meant. Ay, ay,
He'd play me something by and by,
Though he was naught to Jake ; and now
His breath was scant and fingering slack . . .

He used to play to her at night
The melodies that she liked best
While she worked on : she'd never rest
By daylight or by candle-light . . .
And then with hand upon his brow
He brooded quiet in his chair
With eyes upon the red peat-glare,
Till with a sigh he roused himself
And reached the flute down from the shelf,
And carrying it outside the door
I saw him take a can and pour
Fresh water through the instrument,
To make it sweet of tone he said.
Then in his seat, so old and bent,
With kindling eyes and swaying head
He played the tunes he used to play
To please his wife before she died.
And as I watched his body sway
In time and tune from side to side—
So happy just to play and please

With old familiar melodies,
His eyes grew brighter and more bright
As though he saw some well-loved sight :
And following his happy gaze
I turned and saw without amaze
A woman standing, young and fair,
With hazel eyes and thick brown hair
Brushed smoothly backward from the brow,
Beside the table that but now
Save for the empty mugs was bare.
Upon it she had spread a sheet
And stood there, ironing a shirt,
Her husband's, as he played to her
Her favourite tunes so old and sweet.
I watched her move with soundless stir
Then stand with listening eyes, and hold
The iron near her glowing cheek,
Lest it, too hot, should do some hurt,
And she, so careful not to burn
The well-darned shirt so worn and old.

Then something seemed to make me turn
To look on the old man again ;
And as I looked the playing stopped,
And now I saw that he had dropped
Into his brooding mood once more
With eyes again grown dull and weak.
He seemed the oldest of old men
Who grope through life with sight grown dim,
And even as I looked at him,
Too full of tender awe to speak,
I knew once more the board was bare
And no young woman standing there
With hazel eyes and thick brown hair.

And so at last I rose and took
His hand, and as he clasped mine tight
I saw again that friendly look
Fill his old weary eyes with light
And wish me, without words, good-night :
And in my heart that look glowed bright
Till I reached home across the moor.

And at the corner of the lane
Next night I heard the old voice cry
In greeting as I struggled by,
Head-down against the wind and rain :
And so each night until one day
His master chanced to cross my way ;
But when I spoke of him he said
Did I not know the man was dead,
And had been dead a week or so.
One morn he'd not turned up to work,
And never having known him shirk,
And hearing that he lived alone,
He'd thought it best himself to go
And see what ailed, and, coming there,
He found the old man in his chair
Stone-dead beside the cold hearthstone.
It must be full a week or more . . .
Ay, just two weeks come Saturday
He'd found him, but he must have died
Overnight—(the night I heard him play !)
And they had found, dropt by his side,
A broken flute upon the floor.

Yet every night his greeting still
At that same corner of the hill,
Summer and winter, wet or dry,
'Neath cloud or moon or cold starlight
Is waiting there to welcome me ;
And ever as I hurry by
The old voice sings out cheerily—
Good-night ! and yet again—*Good-night !*

THE CRANE

THE biggest crane on earth, it lifts
Two hundred ton more easily
Than I can lift my heavy head ;
And when it swings the whole world shifts,

Or so at least it seems to me,
As day and night adream I lie
Upon my crippled back in bed,
And watch it up against the sky.

My mother, hunching in her chair
Day-long, and stitching trousers there
At three-and-three the dozen pair . . .
She'd sit all night and stitch for me,
Her son, if I could only wear. . . .
She never lifts her eyes to see
The big crane swinging through the air.

But though she has no time to talk
She always cleans the window-pane
That I may see it clear and plain ;
And as I watch it move, I walk,
Who never walked in all my days . . .
And often as I dream agaze,
I'm up and out—and it is I
Who swing the crane across the sky.

Right up above the wharf I stand
And touch a lever with my hand
To lift a bunch of girders high,
A truck of coal, a field of grain
In sacks, a bundle of big trees,
Or beasts, too frightened in my grip
To wonder at their skyey trip ;
And then I let the long arm dip
Without a hitch, without a slip,
To set them safely in the ship
That waits to take them overseas.

My mother little dreams it's I,
Up there as tiny as a fly,
Who stand above the biggest crane
And swing the ship-loads through the sky,
While she sits hunching in her chair
Day-long, and stitching trousers there
At three-and-three the dozen pair.
And sometimes when it turns me dizzy
I lie and watch her, ever busy,

And wonder at a lot of things
 I never speak to her about :
 I wonder why she never sings
 Like other people on the stair . . .
 And why, whenever she goes out
 Upon a windy day, the air
 Makes her sad eyes so strangely bright . . .
 And if the colour of her hair
 Was brown like mine or always white . . .
 And why, when through the noise of feet
 Of people passing in the street
 She hears a dog yelp or sheep bleat,
 She always starts up in her chair
 And looks before her with strange stare,
 Yet seeing nothing anywhere,
 Though right before her through the sky
 The biggest crane goes swinging by.

But it's a lucky day and rare
 When she's the time to talk with me . . .
 Though only yesterday, when night
 Shut out at last the crane from sight—
 She in her bed, and thinking I
 Was sleeping, though I watch the sky
 At times till it is morning light
 And ships are ready to unload—
 I heard her murmur drowsily :
The pit-pat-pattering of feet
All night along the moonlit road . . .
A yelp, a whistle and a bleat . . .
The bracken's deep and soft and dry . . .
And safe and snug, and no one near . . .
The little burn sings low and sweet,
The little burn sings shrill and clear . . .
And loud all night the cock-grouse talks . . .
There's naught in heaven or earth to fear . . .
The pit-pat-pattering of feet . . .
A yelp, a whistle and a bleat.
 And then she started up in bed :
 I felt her staring as she said :
I wonder if he ever hears
The pit-pat-pattering of sheep

Or smells the broken bracken stalks . . .
While she is lying sound asleep
Beside him . . . after all these years—
Just nineteen years this very night—
Remembering? . . . And now, his son
A man . . . and never stood upright!
 And then I heard a sound of tears,
 But dared not speak or let her know
 I'd caught a single whisper, though
 I wondered long what she had done
 That she should hear the pattering feet :
 And when those queer words in the night
 Had fretted me half-dead with fright
 And set my throbbing head abeat . . .
 Out of the darkness suddenly
 The crane's long arm swung over me
 Among the stars high overhead . . .
 And then it dipped and clutched my bed,
 And I had not a breath to cry
 Before it swung me through the sky
 Above the sleeping city high
 Where blinding stars went blazing by. . . .

My mother, hunching in her chair
 Day-long, and stitching trousers there
 At three-and-three the dozen pair,
 With quiet eyes and smooth brown hair . . .
 You'd little think a yelp or bleat
 Could startle her, or that she was weeping
 So sorely when she thought me sleeping.
 She never tells me why she fears
 The pit-pat-pattering of feet
 All night along the moonlit road . . .
 Or what's the wrong that she has done . . .
 I wonder if 'twould bring her tears
 If she could know that I, her son—
 A man who never stood upright,
 But all the livelong day must lie
 And watch beyond the window-pane
 The swinging of the biggest crane—
 That I within its clutch last night
 Went whirling through the starry sky !

THE LIGHTHOUSE

JUST as my watch was done the fog had lifted,
And we could see the flashing of our light,
And see once more the reef beyond the Head
Over which six days and nights the mist had drifted,
Until it seemed all time to mist had drifted
And day and night were but one blind white night.

But on the seventh midnight the wind shifted,
And I was glad to tumble into bed,
Thankful to hear no more the blaring horn
That ceaselessly had sounded night and morn
With moaning echoes through the mist to warn
The blind bewildered ships at sea :
Yet, though as tired as any dog,
I lay awhile and seemed to feel
Fog lying on my eyes still heavily,
And still the horn unceasingly
Sang through my head, till gradually
Through night's strange stillness over me
Sweet sleep began to steal,
Sleep blind and thick and fleecy as the fog.

For all I knew, I might have slept
A moment—or eternity,
When, startled by a crash,
I waked to find I'd leapt
Upright on the floor ;
And stood there listening to the smash
Of falling glass . . . and then a thud
Of something heavy tumbling
Into the next room . . .
A pad of naked feet . . .
A moan . . . a sound of stumbling . . .
A heavier thud . . . and then no more.
And I stood shivering in the gloom,
With creeping flesh and tingling blood,
Until I gave myself a shake
To bring my wits more wide awake,
And lit a lanthorn and flung wide the door.

Half-dazed and dazzled by the light,
At first it seemed I'd only find
A broken pane, a flapping blind ;
But when I raised the lanthorn o'er my head
I saw a naked boy upon the bed
Who crouched and shuddered on the folded sheet,
And on his face before my feet
A naked man who lay as if quite dead,
Though on his broken knuckles blood was red ;
And all my wits awakened at the sight.
I set the lanthorn down and took the child,
Who looked at me with piteous eyes and wild,
And chafed his chill wet body till it glowed,
And, forcing spirit 'twixt his chattering teeth,
I tucked him snugly in beneath
The blankets and soon left him warmly stowed ;
And stooped to tend the man who lay
Still senseless on the floor.
I turned him off his face
And laid him on the other bed,
And washed and staunch'd his wound ;
And yet, for all that I could do,
I could not bring him to,
Or see a trace
Of life returning to that heavy head.

It seemed he'd swooned
When through the window he'd made way,
Just having strength to lay
The boy in safety. Still as death
He lay without a breath ;
And, seeing I could do no more
To help him in the fight for life,
I turned again to tend the lad,
And as I looked on him was glad
To find him sleeping quietly.
So, fetching fuel, I lit a fire
And quickly had as big a blaze
As any housewife could desire :
Then 'twixt the beds I set a chair,
That I might watch until they stirred :
And as I saw them lying there—

The sleeping boy and him who lay
In that strange stiller sleep, 'twas plain
That they were son and father, now
I'd time to look and wonder how
In such a desperate plight,
Without a stitch or rag,
They'd taken refuge from the night.
And, as I wondered drowsily,
It seemed still queerer and more queer :
For round the Head the rocks are sheer
With scarce a foothold for a bird,
And it seemed quite beyond belief
That any wrecked upon that reef
Could swim ashore and scale the crag
By daylight, let alone by night.

But they who live beside the sea
Know naught's too wonderful to be :
And as I sat and heard
The quiet breathing of the child
Great weariness came over me,
And in a kind of daze
I watched the blaze
With nodding head,
And must have slept, for presently
I found the man was sitting up in bed,
And talking to himself with wide unseeing eyes.
At first I hardly made out what he said :
But soon his voice, so hoarse and wild,
Grew calm, and, straining, I could hear
The broken words that came with many sighs.

*Yes, lad, she's going, but there's naught to fear,
For I can swim and tow you in the belt.
Come, let's join hands together and leap clear . . .
Ay, son, it's dark and cold . . . but you have felt
The cold and dark before . . .
And you should scorn . . .
And we must be near shore . . .
For hark, the horn !
Think of your mother and your home and leap . . .
She thinks of us, lad, waking or asleep . . .*

You would not leave her lonely ?

Nay . . . then . . . go !

Well done, lad ! . . . Nay ! I'm here . . .

Ay, son, it's cold, but you're too big to fear.

Now then you're snug : I've got you safe in tow :

The worst is over and we've only

To make for land . . . we've naught . . . to do . . . but steer . . .

But steer . . . but steer . . .

He paused and sank down in the bed, quite done,

And lay a moment silent, while his son

Still slumbered in the other bed,

And on his quiet face the firelight shone :

Then once again the father raised his head

And rambled on—

Say, lad, what cheer ?

I thought you'd dropt asleep, but you're all right.

We'll rest a moment . . . I'm quite out of breath . . .

It's further than . . . Nay, son ! there's naught to fear . . .

The land must be quite near—

The horn is loud enough !

Only your father's out of puff :

He's getting fat and lazy, is your dad.

Ay, lad,

It's cold ;

But you're too old

To cry for cold.

Now . . . keep . . . tight hold,

And we'll be off again.

I've got my breath. . . .

He sank once more as still as death,

With hands that clutched the counterpane ;

But still the boy was sleeping quietly.

And then the father sat up suddenly

And cried—*See ! See !*

The land ! The land !

It's near . . . I touch it with my hand.

And now *O God !* he moaned.

Small wonder when he saw what lay before—

The black unbroken crags so grim and high

That must have seemed to him to soar
Sheer from the sea's edge to the sky.
But soon he plucked up heart once more :
We're safe, lad—safe ashore !
A narrow ledge, but land, firm land.
We'll soon be high and dry..
Nay, son, we can't stay here :
The waves would have us back
Or we should perish of the cold.
Come, lad, there's naught to fear . . .
You must be brave and bold.
Perhaps we'll strike a track.
Ay, son, it's steep and black
And slimy to the hold ;
But we must climb . . . and see ! the mist is gone :
The stars are shining clear. . . .
Think, son, your mother's at the top,
And you'll be up in no time. See that star,
The brightest star that ever shone,
Just think it's she that watches you
And knows that you'll be brave and true.
Come, lad, we may not stop . . .
Or else the cold . . .
Give me your hand . . .
Your foot there now . . . just room to stand.
It cannot be so far . . .
We'll soon be up . . . this work should make us warm.
Thank God it's not a storm,
Or we should scarce . . . Your foot here firm . . .
Nay, lad ! You must not squirm.
Come, be a man : you shall not fall :
I'll hold you tight.
There—now you are my own son after all !
Your mother, lad,
Her star burns bright . . .
And we're already half-way up the height. . . .
Your mother will be glad,
Ay, she'll be glad to hear
Of her brave boy who had no fear.

Your foot . . . your hand . . . 'twas but a bird
You startled out of bed :

*'Twould think it queer
 To wake up suddenly and see your head ;
 And when you stirred . . .
 Nay ! steady, lad !
 Or you will send your dad . . .
 Your hand . . . your foot . . . We'll rest upon this ledge . . .
 Why, son, we're at the top ! I feel the edge
 And grass—soft dewy grass !
 Let go one moment and I'll draw you up. . . .
 Now, lad ! . . . Thank God that's past !
 And you are safe at last—
 You're safe, you're safe . . . and now my precious lass
 Will see her son, her little son, again.*

*I never thought to reach the top to-night.
 God ! What a height !
 Nay, but you must not look : 'twould turn your head :
 And we must not stand shivering here . . .
 And see !—a flashing light . . .
 It's sweeping towards us, and now you stand bright. . . .
 Ah, your poor bleeding hands and feet !
 My little son, my sweet !
 There's nothing more to fear.
 A lighthouse, lad ! And we must make for it.
 You're tired ; I'll carry you a bit.
 Nay, son, 'twill warm me up . . .
 And there will be a fire and bed,
 And even perhaps a cup
 Of something hot to drink,
 And something good to eat.
 And think, son, only think—
 Your home . . . and mother . . . once again !*

Once more the weary head
 Sank back upon the bed ;
 And for a while he hardly stirred,
 But only muttered now and then
 A broken word,
 As though to cheer
 His son who slept so quietly
 At the other side of me.

And then my blood ran cold to hear
 A sudden cry of fear :
My son ! My son !
Ah God, he's done !
I thought I'd laid him on the bed. . . .
I've laid him on white mist instead. . . .
He's fallen sheer. . . .

Then I sprang up and cried : *Your son is here !*
 And taking up the sleeping boy
 I bore him to his father's arms,
 And as he nestled to his breast
 Kind life came back to those wild eyes
 And filled them with deep joy,
 And free of all alarms
 The son and father lay
 Together in sweet rest,
 While through the window stole the strange clear light of day.

THE MONEY

THEY found her cold upon the bed.
 The cause of death, the doctor said,
 Was nothing but the lack of bread.

Her clothes were but a sorry rag
 That barely hid the nakedness
 Of her poor body's piteous wreck,
 Yet, when they stripped her of her dress,
 They found she was not penniless,
 For in a little silken bag,
 Tied with red ribbon round her neck,
 Was four-pound-seventeen-and-five.

*It seems a strange and shameful thing
 That she should starve herself to death
 While she'd the means to keep alive.
 Why, such a sum would keep the breath
 Within her body till she'd found
 A livelihood, and it would bring . . .*

*But there was very little doubt
She'd set her heart upon a grand
And foolish funeral—for the pride
Of poor folk, who can understand?—
And so because she was too proud
To meet death penniless, she died!*

And talking, talking, they trooped out ;
And as they went I turned about
To look upon her in her shroud,
And saw again the quiet face
That filled with light that shameful place,
Touched with the tender youthful grace
Death brings the broken and outworn
To comfort kind hearts left to mourn.

And as I stood the sum they'd found
Rang with a queer familiar ring
Of some uncouth, uncanny sound
Heard in dark ages underground,
And *four-pound-seventeen-and-five*
Through all my body seemed to sing,
Without recalling anything
To help me, strive as I might strive.

But as I stumbled down the stairs
Into the alley's gloom and stench—
A whiff of burning oil
That took me unawares—
And I knew all there was to tell ;
And though the rain in torrents fell
I walked on heedless through the drench . . .
And all the while I seemed to sit
Upon a tub in Lansel pit,
And in the candle-light to see
John Askerton, a "deputy"
Who paused awhile to talk with me,
His kind face glistening black with toil.

*'Twas here I found him dead beside
His engine. All the other men
Were up, for things were slack just then,*

*And I'd one foot upon the cage,
When all at once I caught a smell
Of burning. Even as I turned
To see what it could be that burned,
The seam behind was choked with stife :
And so I dropped on hands and knees
And crawled along the gallery
Beneath the smoke, that I might see
What ailed ; and as I crept half-blind,
With smarting eyes and breath awheeze,
I scarcely knew what I should find.
At times I thought I'd never know. . . .
It seemed already quite an age
Since I'd set out. . . . I felt as though
I had been crawling all my life
Beneath that stifling cloud of smoke
That clung about me fit to choke :
And when at last I'd struggled here
'Twas long ere I could see things clear—
That he was lying here, and he
Was dead, and burning like a tree—
A tree-trunk soaked in oil. . . . No doubt
The engine had caught fire somehow,
And when he tried to put it out
His greasy clothes had caught—and now !*

*As fine a lad as you could see—
And such a lad for singing—I
Had heard him when I worked hard-by ;
And often quiet I would sit
To hear him singing in the pit,
As if his heart knew naught of it,
And life was nothing but a song.*

*He'd not been working with us long,
And little of his ways I knew ;
But when I'd got him up at last
And he was lying in the shed,
The sweet song silent in his breast,
And there was nothing more to do,
The notion came into my head
That he had always been well dressed,*

And seemed a neat and thrifty lad . . .
And lived in lodgings . . . so maybe
Would carry on him all he had.
So back into the cage I stepped
And when it reached the bottom crept
Along the gallery again,
And in the dust where he had lain
I rummaged until I found all
That from his burning pockets fell :
And when it seemed there was no more
I thought how, happy and alive,
And recking naught that might befall,
He too, for all that I could tell,
Just where I stood had reckoned o'er
That four-pound-seventeen-and-five.

Ay, like enough—for soon I heard
That in a week he'd looked to wed.
He'd meant to give the girl that night
The money to buy furniture.
She came and watched till morning-light
Beside the body in the shed,
Then rose, and took without a word
The money he had left for her.

Then as I wandered through the rain
 I seemed to stand in awe again
 Beside that lonely garret-bed.
 And it was good to think the dead
 Had known the wealth she would not spend
 To keep a little while alive—
 His four-pound-seventeen-and-five—
 Would buy her house-room in the end.

THE SNOW

JUST as the school came out
 The first white flakes were drifting round about,
 And all the children shouted with delight
 To see such flakes, so big, so white,

Tumbling from a cloud so black
And whirling helter-skelter
Across the windy moor ;
And, as they saw the light flakes race,
Started off in headlong chase,
Swooping on them with a shout
When they seemed to drop for shelter
Underneath the dry-stone wall.

And then the master at the schoolhouse door
Called out to them to hurry home before
The storm should come on worse, and watched till all
Had started off by road or moorland track,
When, turning to his wife, he said
It looked like dirty weather overhead :
He thought 'twould be a heavy fall
And threatened for a roughish night ;
But they would all reach home in broad daylight :
'Twas early yet ; he'd let the school out soon
As it had looked so lowering since forenoon,
And many had a goodish step to go,
And it was but ill-travelling in the snow :
Then by the fire he settled down to read
And to the weather paid no further heed.

And on their road home, full three miles away,
John and his little sister Janey started,
And at the setting out were happy-hearted
To be let loose into a world so gay
With jolly winds and frisking flakes at play
That flicked your cheek and whistled in your teeth ;
And now hard on each other's heels they darted
To catch a flake that floated like a feather,
Then dropped to nestle in a clump of heather,
And often tumbled both together
Into a deep delicious bed
Of brown and springy heath :
But when the sky grew blacker overhead,
As if it were the coming on of night,
And every little hill, well known to sight,
Looked big and strange in its new fleece of white,
And as yet faster and more thickly

The big flakes fell,
To John the thought came that it might be well
To hurry home ; so, striding on before,
He set a steady face across the moor
And called to Janey she must come more quickly.

The wind soon dropped, and fine and dry the snow
Came whispering down about them as they trudged,
And when they'd travelled for a mile or so
They found it ankle-deep, for here the storm
Had started long before it reached the school ;
And as he felt the dry flakes tingling warm
Upon his cheek and set him all aglow,
John in his manly pride a little grugged
That now and then he had to wait a while
For Janey, lagging like a little fool ;
But when they'd covered near another mile
Through that bewildering white without a sound
Save rustling, rustling, rustling all around,
And all his well-known world so queer and dim,
He waited until she caught up to him,
And felt quite glad that he was not alone.

And when they reached the low half-buried stone
That marked where some old shepherd had been found,
Lost in the snow in seeking his lost sheep
One wild March night full forty years ago,
He wished and wished that they were safe and sound
In their own home : and as the snow got deeper
And every little bank seemed strangely steeper,
He thought and thought of that lost sleeper
And saw him lying in the snow,
Till every fleecy clump of heath
Seemed to shroud a man beneath ;
And now his blood went hot and cold
Through very fear of that dread sight,
And then he felt that in sheer fright
He must take to his heels in flight
He cared not whither, so that it might be
Where there were no more bundles cold and white
Like sheeted bodies plain to see,

And all on edge he turned to chide
His sister, dragging at his side ;
But when he found that she was crying
Because her feet and hands were cold,
He quite forgot to scold
And spoke kind words of cheer to her,
And saw no more dead shepherds lying
In any snowy clump of heather.
So hand in hand they trudged together
Through that strange world of drifting gloam,
Sharp-set and longing sore for home.

And John remembered how that morning
When they set out the sky was blue—
Clean cloudless blue, and gave no warning ;
And how through air as clear as glass
The far-off hills he knew
Looked strangely near and glittered brightly,
Each sprig of heath and blade of grass
In the cold wind blowing lightly,
Each clump of green and crimson moss
Sparkling in the wintry sun.

But now as they toiled home across
Those unfamiliar fells, nigh done,
The wind again began to blow,
And thicker, thicker fell the snow
Till Janey sank too numb to stir,
And John stooped down and lifted her
To carry her upon his back.
And then his head began to tire,
And soon he seemed to lose the track . . .
And now the world was all afire . . .
Now dazzling white, now dazzling black . . .
And then, through some strange land of light
Where clouds of butterflies all white
Fluttered and flickered all about,
Dancing ever in and out,
He wandered, blinded by white wings
That rustled, rustled in his ears
With cold uncanny whisperings . . .

And then it seemed his bones must crack
With that dead-weight upon his back . . .
When on his cheek he felt warm tears
And a cold tangle of wet hair,
And knew 'twas Janey weeping there ;
And taking heart he stumbled on,
While in his breast the hearthlight shone,
And it was all of his desire
To sit once more before the fire
And feel the friendly glowing heat :
But as he strove with fumbling feet
It seemed that he would never find
Again that cheery hearth and kind,
But wander ever bent and blind
Beneath his burden through a night
Of dreadful spangly whispering white.

The wind rose and the dry snow drifted
In little eddies round the track,
And when at last the dark cloud rifted
He saw a strange lough, lying cold and black
'Mid unknown ghostly hills, and knew
That they were lost : and once again
The snow closed in and swept from view
The dead black water and strange fells.

But still he struggled on ; and then,
When he seemed climbing up an endless steep
And ever slipping, sliding back
With ankles aching like to crack,
And only longed for sleep,
He heard a tinkly sound of bells
That kept on ringing, ringing, ringing,
Until his dizzy head was singing
And he could think of nothing else :
And then it seemed the weight was lifted
From off his back and on the ground
His sister stood, while all around
Were giants clad in coats of wool,
With big curled horns and queer black faces,
Who bobbed and curtsied in their places
With blazing eyes and strange grimaces,

But never made a sound,
Then nearly shook themselves to pieces,
Shedding round a smell of warm wet fleeces ;
And one it seemed as if he knew,
Looking like the old lame ewe,
Began to bite his coat and pull
Till he could hardly stand, its eyes
Glowing to a monstrous size
Till they were like a lanthorn-light
Burning brightly in the night . . .
When some one stooped from out the sky
To rescue him and set him high—
And he was riding snug and warm
In some king's chariot through the storm
Without a sound of wheel or hoof—
In some king's chariot filled with straw,
And he would never more be cold. . . .

And then with wondering eyes he saw
Deep caverns of pure burning gold,
And knew himself in fairyland :
But when he stretched an eager hand
To touch the glowing walls he felt
A queer warm puff as though of fire . . .
And suddenly he felt
The reek of peat and, looking higher,
He saw the old black porridge-kettle
Hanging from the cavern roof,—
Hanging from its own black crook—
And he was lying on the settle,
While by his side
With tender look
His mother knelt,
And he had only one desire
In all the world and 'twas to fling
His arms about her neck and hide
His happy tears against her breast :
And as to her he closely pressed,
He heard his merry father sing—
There was a silly sleepyhead
Who thought he'd like to go to bed,

*So in a stell he went to sleep
And snored among the other sheep.*

And then his mother gently said :
*Nay, father, do not tease him now :
 He's quite worn out and needs a deal
 Of quiet sleep ; and after all
 He brought his sister safe from school.*
 And now he felt her warm tears fall
 Upon his cheek, and thrilled to feel
 His father's hand on his hot brow
 And hear him say : *The lad's no fool.*

RED FOX

I HATED him . . . his beard was red . . .
 Red fox, red thief ! Ah God, that she—
 She with the proud and lifted head
 That never stooped to glance at me—
 So fair and fancy-free, should wed
 A slinking dog-fox such as he !

Was it last night I hated him ?
 Last night ? It seems an age ago. . . .
 At whiles my mind comes over dim
 As if God's breath . . . yet ever slow
 And dull, too dull I . . . Limb from limb
 Last night I could have torn him, so !

My lonely bed was fire and ice.
 I could not sleep. I could not lie.
 I shut my hot eyes once or twice . . .
 And saw a red fox slinking by—
 A red dog-fox that turned back thrice
 To mock me with a merry eye.

And so I rose to pace the floor . . .
 And ere I knew my clothes were on . . .
 And as I stood outside the door
 Cold in the summer moonlight shone
 The gleaming barrel . . . and no more
 I feared the fox, for fear was gone.

The best of friends, I said, *must part* . . .
The best of friends must part, I said ;
And like the creaking of a cart
The words went wheeling through my head—
The best of friends . . . and in my heart
Red fox already lying dead !

I took the trackway through the wood.
Red fox had sought a woodland den
When she . . . when she . . . But 'twas not good
To think on her too much just then. . . .
The woman must beware, who stood
Between two stark and fearless men.

The pathway took a sudden turn . . .
And in a trice my steps were stayed.
Before me in the moonlit fern
A young dog-fox and vixen played
With their red cubs beside the burn . . .
And I stood trembling and afraid.

They frolicked in the warm moonlight—
A scuffling heap of heads and heels . . .
A rascal rush, a playful bite,
A scuttling brush and frightened squeals . . .
A flash of teeth . . . a show of fight . . .
Then lively as a bunch of eels

Once more they gambolled in the brake
And tumbled headlong in the stream,
Then scrambled, gasping, out to shake
Their sleek wet furry coats agleam . . .
I watched them, fearful and awake . . .
I watched them, hateless and adream.

The dog-fox gave a bark, and then
All ran to him, and full of pride
He took the trackway up the glen,
His family trotting by his side,
The young cubs nosing up the glen
With trailing brushes, sleepy-eyed.

And then it seems I must have slept—
Dropt dead-asleep, dropt dead-outworn.
I wakened as the first gleam crept
Among the fern, and it was morn. . . .
God's eye about their house had kept
Good watch the night her son was born.

THE OVENS

HE trailed along the cinder-track
Beside the sleek canal, whose black
Cold slinking waters shivered back
Each frosty spark of starry light ;
And each star pricked, an icy pin,
Through his old jacket worn and thin ;
The raw wind rasped his shrinking skin
As if stark-naked to its bite :
Yet, cutting through him like a knife,
It would not cut the thread of life,
But only turned his feet to stones
With red-hot soles that weighed like lead
In his old broken boots. His head,
Sunk low upon his sunken chest,
Was but a burning icy ache
That strained a skull that would not break
To let him tumble down to rest.
He felt the cold stars in his bones,
And only wished that he were dead
With no curst searching wind to shred
The very flesh from off his bones—
No wind to whistle through his bones,
His naked, icy, burning bones :
When, looking up, he saw ahead
The far coke-ovens' glowing light
That burned a red hole in the night—
And but to snooze beside that fire
Was all the heaven of his desire . . .
To tread no more this cursed track
Of crunching cinders through a black

And blasted world of cinder-heaps,
Beside a sleek canal that creeps
Like crawling ice through every bone,
Beneath the cruel stars, alone
With this hell-raking wind that sets
The cold teeth rattling castanets. . . .
Ay, heaven indeed that core of red
In night's black heart that seemed quite dead.

Though still far off, the crimson glow
Through his chilled veins began to flow
And fill his shrivelled heart with heat ;
And as he dragged his senseless feet
That lagged as though to hold him back
In cold eternal hell of black,
With heaven before him blazing red,
The set eyes staring in his head
Were held by spell of fire quite blind
To that black world that fell behind,
A cindery wilderness of death,
As he drew slowly near and nearer
And saw the ovens glowing clearer—
Low-domed and humming hives of heat,
And felt the blast of burning breath
That quivered from each white-hot brick ;
Till, blinded by the blaze, and sick,
He dropped upon a welcome seat
Of warm white ashes, sinking low
To soak his body in the glow
That shot him through with prickling pain,
An eager agony of fire,
Delicious after the cold ache,
And scorched his tingling frosted skin.
Then gradually the anguish passed
And blissfully he lay at last
Without an unfulfilled desire,
His grateful body drinking in
Warm, blessed, snug forgetfulness.

And yet with staring eyes awake,
As though no drench of heat could slake

His thirst for fire, he watched a red
 Hot eye that burned within a chink
 Between the bricks, while overhead
 The quivering stream of hot gold air
 Surged up to quench the cold starlight.
 His brain, too numbed and dull to think
 Throughout the day, in that fierce glare
 Awoke at last with startled stare
 Of pitiless insistent sight
 That stript the stark mean bitter strife
 Of his poor broken wasted life,
 Crippled from birth and struggling on,
 The last least shred of hope long gone,
 To some unknown black bitter end.
 But even as he looked, his brain
 Sank back to sightless sloth again—
 Then all at once he seemed to choke,
 And knew it was the stealthy stife
 And deadly fume of burning coke
 That filled his lungs and seemed to soak
 Through every pore, until the blood
 Grew thick and heavy in his veins,
 And he could scarcely draw a breath.
 He lay and murmured drowsily
 With closing eyes—*If this be death*
It's snug and easy . . . let it come . . .
For life is cold and hard. . . . The flood
Is rising with the heavy rains
That pour and pour. . . . That damned old drum,
Why ever can't they let it be?—
Beat-beating, beating, beating, beat . . .
 Then suddenly he sat upright,
 For close behind him in the night
 He heard a breathing loud and deep,
 And caught a whiff of burning leather.
 He shook himself alive and turned ;
 And on a heap of ashes white,
 O'ercome by the full blast of heat
 Where fieriest the red blaze burned,
 He saw a young girl stretched in sleep.
 He sat awhile, with heavy gaze
 Fixed on her in a dull amaze,

Until he saw her scorched boots smoking,
Then, whispering huskily—*She's dying,*
While I look on and watch her choking !
He roused and pulled himself together
And rose and went where she was lying,
And, bending o'er the senseless lass,
In his weak arms he lifted her
And bore her out beyond the glare,
Beyond the stealthy stifling gas,
Into the fresh and eager air,
And laid her gently on the ground
Beneath the cold and starry sky,
And did his best to bring her round ;
Though still, for all that he could try,
She seemed with each deep labouring breath
Just brought up on the brink of death.
He sought and found an icy pool,
Though he had but a cap to fill,
And bathed her hands and face until
The troubled breath grew quieter
And her flushed forehead felt quite cool ;
And then he saw an eyelid stir,
And, shivering, she sat up at last
And looked about her sullenly.
I'm cold . . . I'm mortal cold, said she :
What call had you to waken me ?
I was so warm and happy, dead . . .
And still those staring stars ! Her head
Dropt in her hands ; and thick and fast
The tears came with a heavy sobbing.
He stood quite helpless while she cried,
And watched her shaken bosom throbbing
With passionate wild weak distress
Till it was spent. And then she dried
Her eyes upon her singed black dress,
Looked up and saw him standing there,
Wondering and more than half-afraid.
But now the nipping hungry air
Took hold of her and struck fear dead.
She only felt the starving sting
That must at any price be stayed,
And cried out, *I am famishing !*

Then from his pocket he took bread
That he had been too weak and sick
To eat o'ernight ; and, eager-eyed,
She took it timidly, and said :
I have not tasted food two days.
And as he waited by her side,
He watched her with a quiet gaze,
And saw her munch the broken crust
So gladly, seated in the dust
Of that black desert's bitter night,
Beneath the freezing stars, so white
And hunger-pinched ; and at the sight
Keen pity touched him to the quick,
Although he never said a word
Till she had finished every crumb :
And then he led her to a seat
A little closer to the heat,
But well beyond the deadly stife :
And in the ashes side by side
They sat together dazed and dumb
With eyes upon the ovens' glare,
Each looking nakedly on life.
And then at length she sighed and stirred,
Still staring deep and dreamy-eyed
Into the whitening steady glow.
With jerky broken words and slow,
And biting at her finger-ends,
She talked at last and spoke out all
Quite open-heartedly as though
There were not any stranger there—
The fire and he, both bosom friends.
She'd left her home three months ago—
She, country-born and country-bred,
Had got the notion in her head
That she'd like city-service best . . .
And so no country place could please. . . .
And she had worried without rest
Until at last she got her ends,
And, wiser than her folk and friends,
She left her home among the trees. . . .
The trees grew thick for miles about
Her father's house . . . the forest spread

As far as ever you could see . . .
And it was green in summer, green . . .
Since she had left her home she'd seen
No greenness could compare with it. . . .
And everything was fresh and clean
And not all smutched and smirched with smoke :
They burned no sooty coal and coke
But only wood-logs, ash and oak. . . .
And by the fire at night they'd sit . . .
Ah ! wouldn't it be rare and good
To smell the sappy sizzling wood
Once more, and listen to the stream
That runs just by the garden-gate. . . .
And often, in a winter spate,
She'd wakened from a troubled dream
And lain in bed and heard it roar,
And quaked to hear it as a child . . .
It seemed so angry and so wild—
Just mad to sweep the house away !
And now it was three months or more
Since she had heard it, on the day,
The day she left . . . and Michael stood—
He was a woodman too, and he
Worked with her father in the wood ;
And wanted her, she knew . . . but she
Was proud—had thought herself too good
To marry any country lad.
'Twas queer to think she'd once been proud,
And such a little while ago—
A beggar, wolfing crusts ! The pride
That made her quit the countryside
Soon left her stranded in the crowd . . .
And precious little pride she had
To keep her warm these freezing days
Since she had fled the city-ways
To walk back home . . . ay, home again :
For in the town she'd tried in vain
For honest work to earn her bread :
At one place they'd nigh slaved her dead,
And starved her too, and when she left
Had cheated her of half her wage ;
And she'd no means to stop the theft :

And she had had no work to do . . .
 Two months since now . . . it seemed an age !
 How she had lived she scarcely knew . . .
 And still, poor fool, too proud to write
 To home for help, until at length
 She'd not a penny for a bite
 Or pride enough to clothe her back.
 So she was tramping home, too poor
 To pay the train-fare. . . . She'd the strength
 If she'd the food . . . but that hard track
 And that cold, cruel bitter night
 Had taken all the heart from her. . . .
 If Michael knew, she felt quite sure . . .
 For she would rather drop stone-dead
 Than live as some. . . . If she had cared
 To feed upon the devil's bread,
 She could have earned it easily. . . .
 She'd pride enough to starve instead,
 Ay, starve than fare as some girls fared. . . .
 But that was all behind, and she
 Was going home. . . . And yet maybe
 If they'd a home like hers, they too
 Would be too proud . . . she only knew
 The thought of home had kept her straight
 And saved her ere it was too late.
 She'd soon be home again. . . .

And now

She sat with hand upon her brow
 And did not speak again or stir.

And as he heard her words, his gaze
 Still set upon the steady glare,
 His thoughts turned back to city-ways ;
 And he remembered common sights
 That he had seen in city nights—
 And once again in early June
 He wandered through the midnight street,
 And heard those ever-pacing feet
 Of young girls, children yet in years,
 With gaudy ribbons in their hair,
 And shameless fevered eyes astare,
 And slack lips set in brazen leers,

Who walked the pavements of despair
Beneath the fair full summer moon,
Shadowed by worn-out wizened hags,
With claw-hands clutching filthy rags
About old bosoms shrunk and thin,
And mouths aleer without a tooth,
Who dogged them, cursing their sleek youth
That filched their custom and their bread. . . .
Then in a reek of hot gas-light
He stood where, through the summer night,
Half-dozing in the stifling air,
The greasy landlord, fat with sin,
Sat lolling in his easy chair
Just half-way up the brothel stair
To tax the earnings they brought in,
With ear cocked for the copper's tread. . . .

Then, shuddering back from that foul place,
And turning from the ovens' glare,
He looked into her dreaming face
And saw green sunlit woodlands there,
And waters flashing in between
Low-drooping boughs of summer green.

And as he looked, still in a dream
She murmured : Michael would, she knew . . .
Though she'd been foolish, he was true,
As true as steel, and fond of her. . . .
And then she sat with eyes agleam
In dreaming silence till the stir
Of cold dawn shivered through the air ;
When, twisting up her tumbled hair,
She rose and said she must be gone.
Though she'd still far to go, the day
Would see her well upon her way . . .
And she had best be jogging on
While she'd the strength . . . and so *Good-bye !*

And as beneath the paling sky
He trudged again the cinder-track
That stretched before him dead and black,

He muttered : *It's a chance the light
Has found me living still . . . And she—
She too . . . and Michael . . . and through me !
God knows whom I may wake to-night !*

THE DANCING SEAL

WHEN we were building Skua Light—
The first men who had lived a night
Upon that deep-sea Isle,
As soon as chisel touched the stone
The friendly seals would come ashore
And sit and watch us all the while,
As if they'd not seen men before,
And so, poor beasts, had never known
Men had the heart to do them harm.
They'd little cause to feel alarm
With us, for we were glad to find
Some friendliness in that strange sea,
Only too pleased to let them be
And sit as long as they'd a mind
To watch us, for their eyes were kind
Like women's eyes it seemed to me.
So hour on hour they sat : I think
They liked to hear the chisels' clink,
And when the boy sang loud and clear
They scrambled closer in to hear,
And if he whistled sweet and shrill
The queer beasts shuffled nearer still,
But every sleek and sheeny skin
Was mad to hear his violin.

When, work all over for the day,
He'd take his fiddle down and play
His merry tunes beside the sea,
Their eyes grew brighter and more bright
And burned and twinkled merrily ;
And, as I watched them one still night
And saw their eager sparkling eyes,
I felt those lively seals would rise,

Some shiny night ere he could know,
And dance about him heel and toe
Unto the fiddle's heady tune.

And at the rising of the moon,
Half-daft, I took my stand before
A young seal lying on the shore
And called on her to dance with me :
And it seemed hardly strange when she
Stood up before me suddenly
And shed her black and sheeny skin
And smiled, all eager to begin . . .
And I was dancing heel and toe
With a young maiden white as snow
Unto a crazy violin.

We danced beneath the dancing moon
All night beside the dancing sea
With tripping toes and skipping heels,
And all about us friendly seals
Like Christian folk were dancing reels
Unto the fiddle's endless tune
That kept on spinning merrily
As though it never meant to stop ;
And never once the snow-white maid
A moment stayed
To take a breath,
Though I was fit to drop ;
And while those wild eyes challenged me
I knew as well as well could be
I must keep step with that young girl,
Though we should dance to death.

Then with a skirl
The fiddle broke :
The moon went out :
The sea stopped dead :
And in a twinkling all the rout
Of dancing folk had fled . . .
And in the chill bleak dawn I woke
Upon the naked rock alone.

They've brought me far from Skua Isle . . .
 I laugh to think they do not know
 That, as all day I chip the stone
 Among my fellows here inland,
 I smell the sea-wrack on the shore . . .
 And see her snowy tossing hand,
 And meet again her merry smile . . .
 And dream I'm dancing all the while,
 I'm dancing ever, heel and toe,
 With a seal-maiden white as snow,
 On that moonshiny island-strand
 For ever and for evermore.

THE SLAG

AMONG bleak hills of mounded slag they walked
 'Neath sullen evening skies that seemed to sag,
 O'er-burdened by the belching smoke, and lie
 Upon their aching foreheads dense and dank,
 Till both felt youth within them fail and flag—
 Even as the flame which shot, a fiery rag,
 A fluttering moment through the murky sky
 Above the black blast-furnaces, then sank
 Again beneath the iron bell close-bound ;
 And it was all that they could do to drag
 Themselves along 'neath that dead-weight of smoke
 Over the cinder-blasted barren ground.
 Though fitfully and fretfully she talked,
 He never turned his eyes to her or spoke ;
 And, as he slouched with her along the track
 That skirted a stupendous lowering mound,
 With listless eyes and o'er-strained sinews slack,
 She bit a petted puckered lip, and frowned
 To think she ever should be walking out
 With this tongue-tied, slow-witted, hulking lout,
 As cold and dull and lifeless as the slag.

On edge and overwrought by the cramped day
 Of crouched close stitching at her dull machine,
 It seemed to her a girl of seventeen

Should have at least an hour of careless talking—
Should have at least an hour of life, out walking
Beside a lover mettlesome and gay,
Not through her too short freedom doomed to lag
Beside a sparkless giant glum and grim
Till all her eager youth should waste away.
Yet, even as she looked askance at him,
Well-knit, big-thewed, broad-chested, steady-eyed,
She dimly knew of depths she could not sound
In this strong lover silent at her side ;
And once again her heart was touched with pride
To think that he was hers, this strapping lad,
Black-haired, close-cropped, clean-skinned, and neatly clad—
His crimson neckerchief so smartly tied,
And hers alone, and more than all she had
In all the world to her—and yet so grave !
If he would only show that he was glad
To be with her—a gleam, a spark of fire,
A spurt of flame to shoot into the night,
A moment through the murky heavens to wave
An eager beacon of enkindling light
In answer to her young heart's quick desire !

Yet, though he walked with dreaming eyes agaze,
As deep within a mound of slag a core
Of unseen fire may smoulder many days
Till suddenly the whole heap glow ablaze,
That seemed but now dead cinder, grey and cold,
Life smouldered in his heart. The fire he fed
Day-long in the tall furnace just ahead
From that frail gallery slung against the sky
Had burned through all his being, till the ore
Glowed in him : though no surface-stream of gold
Quick-molten slag of speech was his to spill
Unceasingly, the burning metal still
Seethed in him, from the broken furnace-side
To burst at any moment in a tide
Of white-hot molten iron over the mould. . . .

But still he spoke no word as they strolled on
Into the early-gathering winter night ;
And as she watched the leaping furnace-light

She had no thought of smouldering fires unseen—
The day-long clattering whirr of her machine
Hummed in her ears again, the straining thread
And stabbing needle starting through her head,
Until the last dull gleam of day was gone . . .

When suddenly upon the right
A crackling crash, a blinding flare—
A shower of cinders through the air—
A grind of blocks of slag aslide—
And far above them in the night
The looming heap had opened wide
About a fiery gaping pit . . .
And startled and aghast at it
With clasping hands they stood astare
And gazed upon the awful glare :
And, as she felt him clutch her hand,
She seemed to know her heart's desire—
For evermore with him to stand
In that enkindling blaze of fire. . . .
When suddenly he left her side
And started scrambling up the heap ;
And looking up with stifled cry,
She saw against the glowing sky
Almost upon the pit's red brink
A little lad, stock-still with fright
Before the blazing pit of dread
Agape before him in the night,
Where—playing castles on the height
Since noon—he'd fallen, spent, asleep
And dreaming he was home in bed. . . .

With brain afire, too strained to think,
She watched her lover climb and leap
From jag to jag
Of broken slag . . .
And still he only seemed to creep. . . .
She felt that he would never reach
That little lad though he should climb
Until the very end of time . . .
And, as she looked, the burning breach
Gaped suddenly more wide . . .

The slag again began to slide
And crash into the pit
Until the dazed lad's feet
Stood on the edge of it.
She saw him reel and fall,
And thought him done for . . . then
Her lover, brave and tall
Against the glare and heat,
A very fire-bright god of men !
He stooped . . . and now she knew the lad
Was safe with Robert after all.

And while she'd watched, a throng of folk
Attracted by the crash and flare
Had gathered round, though no one spoke,
But all stood terror-stricken there
With lifted eyes and indrawn breath
Until the lad was snatched from death
Upon the very pit's edge, when
As Robert picked him up and turned,
A sigh ran through the crowd and fear
Gave place to joy, as cheer on cheer
Sang through the kindled air.

But still she never uttered word,
As though she neither saw nor heard,
Till, as at last her lad drew near,
She saw him bend with tender care
Over the sobbing child who lay
Safe in his arms and hug him tight
Against his breast—his brow alight
With eager loving eyes that burned
In his transfigured face aflame. . . .
And even when the parents came
It almost seemed that he was loth
To yield them up their little son,
As though the lad were his by right
Of rescue, from the pit's edge won.

Then, as his eyes met hers, she felt
An answering thrill of tenderness
Run quickening through her breast, and both

Stood quivering there with envious eyes . .
And stricken by a strange distress,
As quickly homeward through the night
The happy parents bore their boy . . .

And then about her reeling bright
The whole night seemed to her to melt
In one fierce fiery flood of joy.

DEVIL'S EDGE

ALL night I lay on Devil's Edge
Along an overhanging ledge
Between the sky and sea,
And as I rested, 'waiting sleep,
The windless sky and soundless deep
In one dim blue infinity
Of starry peace encompassed me.

And I remembered drowsily
How 'mid the hills last night I'd lain
Beside a singing moorland burn,
And waked at dawn to feel the rain
Fall on my face as on the fern
That drooped about my heather-bed ;
And how by noon the wind had blown
The last grey shred from out the sky,
And blew my homespun jacket dry,
As I stood on the topmost stone
That crowns the cairn on Hawkshaw Head
And caught a gleam of far-off sea,
And heard the wind sing in the bent
Like those far waters calling me ;
When, my heart answering to the call,
I followed down the seaward stream
By silent pool and singing fall,
Till with a quiet, keen content
I watched the sun, a crimson ball,
Shoot through grey seas, a fiery gleam,
Then sink in opal deeps from sight.

And with the coming on of night
The wind had dropped ; and as I lay,
Retracing all the happy day
And gazing long and dreamily
Across the dim unsounding sea,
Over the far horizon came
A sudden sail of amber flame,
And soon the new moon rode on high
Through cloudless deeps of crystal sky.

Too holy seemed the night for sleep,
And yet I must have slept it seems ;
For suddenly I woke to hear
A strange voice singing shrill and clear
Down in a gully black and deep
That cleft the beetling crag in twain.
It seemed the very voice of dreams
That drive hag-ridden souls in fear
Through echoing unearthly vales
To plunge in black slow-crawling streams,
Seeking to drown that cry in vain . . .
Or some sea-creature's voice that wails
Through blind white banks of fog unlifting
To God-forgotten sailors drifting
Rudderless to death . . .
And as I heard,
Though no wind stirred,
An icy breath
Was in my hair . . .
And clutched my heart with cold despair.
But, as the wild song died away,
There came a faltering break
That shivered to a sobbing fall,
And seemed half-human after all.

And yet what foot could find a track
In that deep gully sheer and black—
And singing wildly in the night !
So, wondering, I lay awake
Until the coming of the light
Brought day's familiar presence back.

Down by the harbour-mouth that day
A fisher told the tale to me.
Three months before while out at sea
Young Philip Burn was lost, though how
None knew and none would ever know.
The boat becalmed at noonday lay—
And not a ripple on the sea,
And Philip standing at the bow
When his six comrades went below
To sleep away an hour or so,
Dog-tired with working day and night,
While he kept watch : and not a sound
They heard until at set of sun
They woke and, coming up, they found
The deck was empty, Philip gone—
Yet not another boat in sight,
And not a ripple on the sea.
How he had vanished none could tell.
They only knew the lad was dead
They'd left but now alive and well—
And he, poor fellow, newly wed. . . .
And when they broke the news to her
She spoke no word to any one,
But sat all day and would not stir—
Just staring, staring at the fire
With eyes that never seemed to tire
Until at last the day was done
And darkness came, when she would rise
And seek the door with queer wild eyes,
And wander singing all the night
Unearthly songs beside the sea ;
But always the first blink of light
Would find her back at her own door.

'Twas winter when I came once more
To that old village by the shore,
And as at night I climbed the street
I heard a singing low and sweet
Within a cottage near at hand ;
And I was glad awhile to stand
And listen by the glowing pane ;
And, as I hearkened, that sweet strain

Brought back the night when I had lain
Awake on Devil's Edge . . .
And now I knew the voice again,
So different, free of pain and fear—
Its terror turned to tenderness—
And yet the same voice none the less,
Though singing now so true and clear :
And, drawing nigh the window-ledge,
I watched the mother sing to rest
The baby snuggling to her breast.

THE LILAC TREE

*I PLANTED her the lilac tree
Upon our wedding day ;
But when the time of blossom came
With her dead babe she lay . . .
And as I stood beside the bed
The scent of lilac filled the room ;
And always when I smell the bloom
I think upon the dead.*

He spoke and, speaking, sauntered on,
The young girl by his side :
And then they talked no more of death,
But only of the happy things
That burst their buds and spread their wings
And break in song at Whitsuntide,
That burst to bloom at Whitsuntide
And bring the summer in a breath.

And as they talked the young girl's life
Broke into bloom and song ;
And, one with all the happy things
That burst their buds and spread their wings,
Her very blood was singing,
And at her pulses ringing ;
Life tingled through her sweet and strong,
From secret sources springing ;
And all at once a quickening strife

Of hopes and fears was in her heart
Where only wondering joy had been ;
And, kindling with a sudden light,
Her eyes had sight
Of things unseen ;
And, in a flash a woman grown,
With pangs of knowledge fierce and keen
She knew strange things unknown.

A year went by. At Whitsuntide
He brought her home, a bride.

He planted her no lilac tree
Upon their wedding day ;
And strange distress came over her
As on the bed she lay,
For, as he stood beside the bed,
The scent of lilac filled the room.
Her heart knew well he smelt the bloom
And thought upon the dead.

Yet she was glad to be his wife ;
And, when the blossom-time was past,
Her days no more were overcast,
And deep she drank of life ;
And thronged with happy household cares
Her busy days went pleasantly ;
Her foot was light upon the stairs,
And every room rang merrily
And merrily and merrily
With song and mirth ; for unto her
His heart seemed hers, and hers alone,
Until new dreams began to stir
Her wondering breast with bliss unknown
Of some new miracle to be ;
And, though she moved more quietly
And seldom sang, yet happily
From happy dawn to happy night
The mother's eyes shone bright.

But as her time drew near
Her heart was filled with fear,

And, when the lilac burst to bloom
And brought the summer in a breath;
A presence seemed to fill the room
And fill her heart with death;
And, as her husband lay asleep
Beside her on the bed,
Into her breast the thought would creep
That he was dreaming of the dead:
And all the mother's heart in her
Was mad with mother-jealousy
Of that sweet-scented lilac tree;
And blind with savage ecstasy
Night after night she lay
Until the blink of day
With staring eyes and wild,
Half-crazy lest the lilac tree
Should come betwixt him and his child.
By day her mother-tenderness
Was turned to brooding bitterness
Whene'er she looked upon the bloom,
And if she slept at all at night
Her heart would waken in affright
To smell the lilac in the gloom;
And when it rained it seemed to her
The fresh keen scent was bitterer,
Though when the blaze of morning came
And flooded all the room
The perfume burned her heart like flame.

As in the dark
One night she lay
A dark thought shot
Through her hot heart,
And from a spark
Of smouldering wrong
Hate burst to fire.
Now quaking cold,
Now quivering hot,
With breath indrawn
Through time untold
She 'waited dawn,

That lagged too long
For her desire.

And, when at last at break of day
Her husband rose and went his way
About his daily toil,
She too arose and dressed,
With frenzy in her breast,
And stole downstairs and took a spade
And digged about the lilac roots
And laid them bare of soil ;
Then with a jagged blade
She hacked and slashed the naked roots—
She hacked and slashed with frantic hand
Until the lilac scarce might stand ;
And then again the soil she laid
About the bleeding roots—
(It seemed to her the sap ran red
About the writhing roots !)
And yet her heart was eased of strife
Since she had sapped the lilac's life.
And, frenzy-spent, she dropped the knife ;
Then dizzily she crept to bed,
And lay all day as one nigh dead.

That night a sudden storm awoke
And struck the slumbering earth to life ;
And as the heavens in thunder broke
She lay exulting in the strife
Of flash and peal
And gust and rain ;
For now, she thought, the lightning-stroke
Will lay the lilac low,
And he need never know
How I . . . and then again
Her heart went cold with dread,
And she remembered that the knife
Still lay beneath the lilac tree . . .
A blinding flash,
A lull, a crash,
A rattling peal . . .
And suddenly

She felt her senses reel ;
And crying out—*The knife ! The knife !*
Her pangs were on her. . . .

Dawn was red
When she awoke upon the bed
To life—and knew her babe was dead.
She rose and cried out fearfully—
The lilac tree ! The lilac tree !
Then fell back in a swoon.

But when she waked again at noon
And looked upon her sleeping child,
And laid her hand upon its head,
No more the mother's heart was wild,
For hate and fear were dead ;
And all her brooding bitterness
Turned into tears of tenderness.
And not a word the father said
About the lilac lying dead.

A week went by, and Whitsuntide
Came round and, as she lay
And looked upon the newborn day,
Her husband lying by her side
Spoke to her very tenderly :
Wife, 'tis again our wedding day,
And we will plant a lilac tree
In memory of the babe that died.

They planted a white lilac tree
Upon their wedding day ;
And when the time of blossom came
With kindly hearts they lay.
The sunlight streamed upon the bed ;
The scent of lilac filled the room ;
And, as they smelt the breathing bloom,
They thought upon the dead.

THE OLD MAN

THE boat put in at dead of night,
And when I reached the house 'twas sleeping dark.
I knew my gentlest tap would be a spark
To set my home alight :
My mother, ever listening in her sleep
For my returning step, would leap
Awake with welcome, and my father's eyes
Would twinkle merrily to greet me,
And my young sister would run down to meet me
With sleepy sweet surprise.

And yet awhile I lingered
Upon the threshold listening
And watched the cold stars glistening,
And seemed to hear the deep
Calm breathing of the house asleep—
In easy sleep so deep I almost feared to break it ;
And, even as I fingered
The knocker, loth to wake it,
Like some uncanny inkling
Of news from elsewhere
I felt a cold breath in my hair,
As though, with chin upon my shoulder,
One waited hard upon my heel,
With pricking eyes of steel,
Though well I knew that not a soul was there.

Until at last grown bolder
I knocked, and in a twinkling
The house was all afire
With welcome in the night—
First, in my mother's room a light,
And then her foot upon the stair—
A bolt shot back, a candle's flare,
A happy cry—and to her breast
She hugged her heart's desire,
And hushed her fears to rest.

Then, shivering in the keen night air,
My sleepy sister laughing came
And drew us in, and stirred to flame

The smouldering kitchen-fire and set
The kettle on the kindling red ;
And, as I watched the homely blaze
And thought of wandering days
With sharp regret,
I missed my father : then I heard
How he was still abed,
And had been ailing for a day or so,
But now was waking if I'd go . . .

My foot already on the stair,
In answer to my mother's word
I turned, and saw in dull amaze
Behind her, as she stood all unaware,
An old man sitting in my father's chair . . .
A strange old man . . . yet, as I looked at him,
Before my eyes a dim
Remembrance seemed to swim
Of some old man who'd lurked about the boat
While we were still at sea,
And who had crouched beside me at the oar
As we had rowed ashore ;
Though at the time I'd taken little note
I felt I'd seen that strange old man before :
But how he'd come to follow me
Unknown . . .
And to be sitting there . . .
Then I recalled the cold breath in my hair
When I had stood alone
Before the bolted door.

And now my mother, wondering sore
To see me stare and stare
So strangely at an empty chair,
Turned too and saw the old man there.
And, as she turned, he slowly raised
His drooping head
And looked upon her with her husband's eyes.
She stood a moment dazed
And watched him slowly rise
As though to come to her,
Then with a cry she sped
Upstairs ere I could stir,

Still dazed, I let her go alone :
 I heard her footstep overhead :
 I heard her drop beside the bed
 With low forsaken moan.
 Yet I could only stare and stare
 Upon my father's empty chair.

THE HARE

My hands were hot upon a hare,
 Half-strangled, struggling in a snare,
 My knuckles at her warm windpipe—
 When suddenly her eyes shot back,
 Startled and startling, big and black,
 And, ere I knew, my grip was slack
 And I was clutching empty air,
 Half-mad, half-glad at my lost luck . . .
 When I awaked beside the stack.

'Twas just the moment when the snipe,
 As though clock-wakened on the stroke,
 An hour ere dawn, dart in and out,
 Mist-wreaths in every syke asoak,
 And flutter wheeling round about
 And drumming out the summer night.
 I lay star-gazing yet a bit,
 Then, chilly-skinned, I sat upright
 To shrug the shivers from my back,
 And, drawing out a straw to suck,
 My teeth nipped through it at a bite . . .
 The liveliest lad is out of pluck
 An hour ere dawn—a tame cock-sparrow,
 When cold stars shiver through his marrow
 And wet mist soaks his mother-wit.

But as the snipe dropped one by one,
 And one by one the stars blinked out,
 I knew 'twould only need the sun
 To send the shudders right-about ;
 And, as the clear East faded white,

I watched and wearied for the sun—
 The jolly, welcome, friendly sun,
 The sleepy sluggard of a sun
 That still kept snoozing out of sight,
 Though well he knew the night was done . . .
 And after all he caught me dozing,
 And leapt up laughing in the sky
 Just as my lazy eyes were closing ;
 And it was good as gold to lie
 Full-length among the straw and feel
 The day wax warmer every minute
 As, glowing glad from head to heel,
 I soaked and rolled rejoicing in it . . .
 When from the corner of my eye
 Upon a heathery knowe hard-by,
 With long lugs cocked and eyes astare,
 Yet, all serene, I saw a hare.

Upon my belly in the straw
 I lay and watched her sleek her fur
 As, daintily, with well-licked paw,
 She washed her face and neck and ears ;
 Then clean and comely in the sun
 She kicked her heels up full of fun,
 As if she didn't care a pin
 Though she should jump out of her skin,
 And leapt and lolloped free of fears,
 Until my heart frisked round with her.
And yet if I but lift my head
You'll scamper off, young Puss, I said.
Still I can't lie and watch you play,
Upon my belly, half the day.
The Lord alone knows where I'm going,
But I had best be getting there.
Last night I loosed you from the snare—
Asleep or waking, who's for knowing ?—
So I will thank you now for showing
Which art to take to bring me where
My luck awaits me. When you're ready
To start I'll follow on your track.
Though slow of foot I'm sure and steady . . .
 She pricked her ears, then set them back,

And like a shot was out of sight ;
And with a happy heart and light
As quickly I was on my feet
And following the way she went
Across the heather and the bent,
Across the quaking moss and peat.
Of course I lost her soon enough,
For moorland tracks are steep and rough,
And hares are made of nimbler stuff
Than any lad of seventeen,
However lanky-legged and tough,
However kestrel-eyed and keen :
And I'd at last to stop and eat
The little bit of bread and meat
Left in my pocket overnight.
So in a hollow snug and green
I sat beside a burn and dipped
The dry bread in an icy pool,
And munched a breakfast fresh and cool . . .
And then sat gaping like a fool . . .
For, right before my very eyes,
With lugs acock and eyes astare,
I saw again the selfsame hare.

So up I jumped and off she slipped,
And I kept sight of her until
I stumbled in a hole and tripped
And came a heavy headlong spill :
And she, ere I'd the wit to rise,
Was o'er the hill and out of sight ;
And sore and shaken with the tumbling,
And sicker at my foot for stumbling,
I cursed my luck and went on, grumbling,
The way her flying heels had fled.

The sky was cloudless overhead
And just alive with larks asinging ;
And in a twinkling I was swinging
Across the windy hills, lighthearted.
A kestrel at my footstep started,
Just pouncing on a frightened mouse,
And hung o'erhead with wings ahover ;

Through rustling heath an adder darted ;
A hundred rabbits bobbed to cover ;
A weasel, sleek and rusty red,
Popped out of sight as quick as winking ;
I saw a grizzled vixen slinking
Behind a clucking brood of grouse
That rose and cackled at my coming ;
And all about my way were flying
The peewit with their slow wings creaking ;
And little grey snipe darted drumming ;
And now and then a golden plover
Or redshank piped with reedy whistle :
But never shaken bent or thistle
Betrayed the quarry I was seeking,
And not an instant anywhere
Did I clap eyes upon a hare.

So travelling still the twilight caught me,
And as I stumbled on I muttered :
*A deal of luck the hare has brought me !
The wind and I must spend together
A hungry night among the heather.
If I'd her here . . .* And as I uttered
I tripped and heard a frightened squeal,
And dropped my hands in time to feel
The hare just bolting 'twixt my feet.
She slipped my clutch, and I stood there
And cursed that devil-littered hare
That left me stranded in the dark
In that wide waste of quaggy peat
Beneath black night without a spark ;
When, looking up, I saw a flare
Upon a far-off hill and said :
*By God, the heather is afire !
It's mischief at this time of year . . .*
And then, as one bright flame shot higher,
And booths and vans stood out quite clear,
My wits came back into my head,
And I remembered Brough Hill Fair :

And as I stumbled towards the glare
I knew the sudden kindling meant

The Fair was over for the day,
 And all the cattle folk away,
 And gipsy folk and tinkers now
 Were lighting supper-fires without
 Each caravan and booth and tent.
 And as I climbed the stiff hill-brow
 I quite forgot my lucky hare.
 I'd something else to think about ;
 For well I knew there's broken meat
 For empty bellies after fair-time,
 And looked to have a royal rare time,
 With something rich and prime to eat,
 And then to lie and toast my feet
 All night beside the biggest fire.

But even as I neared the first
 A pleasant whiff of stewing burst
 From out a steaming pot abubble ;
 And as I stopped behind the folk
 Who sprawled around and watched it seething,
 A woman heard my eager breathing
 And, turning, caught my hungry eye,
 And called out to me : *Draw in nigher,*
Unless you find it too much trouble,
Or you've a nose for better fare
And go to supper with the Squire—
You've got the hungry parson's air !
 And all looked up and took the joke,
 As I dropped gladly to the ground
 Among them where they all lay gazing
 Upon the bubbling and the blazing.
 My eyes were dazzled by the fire
 At first, and then I glanced around,
 And in those swarthy fire-lit faces—
 Though drowsing in the glare and heat
 And snuffing the warm savour in,
 Dead-certain of their fill of meat—
 I felt the bit between the teeth,
 The flying heels, the broken traces,
 And heard the high-road ring beneath
 The trampling hoofs, and knew them kin.

Then for the first time, standing there,
Behind the woman who had hailed me,
I saw a girl with eyes astare
That looked in terror o'er my head—
And all at once my courage failed me . . .
For now again, and sore adread,
My hands were hot upon a hare
That struggled, strangling in a snare . . .
Then once more, as the girl stood clear
Before me, quaking cold with fear,
I saw the hare look from her eyes.

And when at last I turned to see
What held her scared, I saw a man,
A fat man with dull eyes aleer,
Within the shadow of the van ;
And I was on the point to rise
To send him spinning 'mid the wheels,
And twist his neck between his heels,
And stop his leering grin with mud,
And would have done it in a tick ;
When, suddenly alive with fright,
She started with red parted lips,
As though she guessed we'd come to grips,
And turned her black eyes full on me . . .
And as I looked into their light
My heart forgot the lust of fight,
And something shot me to the quick
And ran like wildfire through my blood,
And tingled to my finger-tips—
And in a dazzling flash I knew
I'd never been alive before . . .
And she was mine for evermore.

While all the others slept asnore
In caravan and tent that night,
I lay alone beside the fire
And stared into the blazing core,
With eyes that would not shut or tire,
Because the best of all was true,
And they looked still into the light
Of her eyes, burning ever bright
Within the brightest coal for me . . .

Once more I saw her, as she started
And glanced at me with red lips parted ;
And as she looked, the frightened hare
Had fled her eyes, and merrily
She smiled with fine teeth flashing white,
As though she too were happy-hearted . . .
Then she had trembled suddenly
And dropped her eyes, as that fat man
Stepped from the shadow of the van
And joined the circle as the pot
Was lifted off and, piping hot,
The supper steamed in wooden bowls.
Yet she had hardly touched a bite,
And never raised her eyes all night
To mine again, but on the coals,
As I sat staring, she had stared—
The black curls shining round her head
From under the red kerchief tied
So nattily beneath her chin :
And she had stolen off to bed
Quite early, looking dazed and scared.
Then, all agape and sleepy-eyed,
Ere long the others had turned in,
And I was rid of that fat man
Who slouched away to his own van.

And now before the van I lay,
With sleepless eyes awaiting day,
And as I gazed into the glare
I heard behind a gentle stir,
And, turning round, I looked on her
Where she stood on the little stair
Outside the van with listening air—
And in her eyes the hunted hare . . .
And then I saw her slip away,
A bundle underneath her arm,
Without a single glance at me.
I lay a moment wondering,
My heart athump like anything,
Then, fearing she should come to harm,
I rose and followed speedily
Where she had vanished in the night.

And as she heard my step behind,
She started and stopped dead with fright,
Then blundered on as if struck blind :
And now as I caught up with her,
Just as she took the moorland track,
I saw the hare's eyes big and black . . .
She made as though she'd double back . . .
But, when she looked into my eyes,
She stood quite still and did not stir . . .
And picking up her fallen pack
I tucked it 'neath my arm, and she
Just took her luck quite quietly
As she must take what chance might come
And would not have it otherwise,
And walked into the night with me
Without a word across the fells.

And all about us through the night
The mists were stealing, cold and white,
Down every rushy syke and slack :
But soon the moon swung into sight,
And as we went my heart was light
And singing like a burn in flood,
And in my ears were tinkling bells ;
My body was a rattled drum,
And fifes were shrilling through my blood
That summer night to think that she
Was walking through the world with me.

But when the air with dawn was chill,
As we were travelling down a hill
She broke the silence with low sobbing,
And told her tale, her bosom throbbing
As though her very heart was shaken
With fear she'd yet be overtaken . . .
She'd always lived in caravans—
Her father's gay as any man's,
Grass-green picked out with red and yellow
And glittering brave with burnished brass
That sparkled in the sun like flame,
And window-curtains white as snow . . .
But they had died ten years ago,

Her parents both, when fever came ;
 And they were buried side by side,
 Somewhere beneath the wayside grass . . .
 In times of sickness they kept wide
 Of towns and busybodies, so
 No parson's or policeman's tricks
 Should bother them when in a fix . . .
 Her father never could abide
 A black coat or a blue, poor man . . .
 And so Long Dick, a kindly fellow
 When you could keep him from the can,
 And Meg, his easygoing wife,
 Had taken her into their van
 And kept her since her parents died . . .
 And she had lived a happy life
 Until Fat Pete's young wife was taken . . .
 But, ever since, he'd pestered her . . .
 And she dared scarcely breathe or stir
 Lest she should see his eyes aleer . . .
 And many a night she'd lain and shaken,
 And very nearly died of fear,
 Though safe enough within the van
 With Mother Meg and her good man ;
 For, since Fat Pete was Long Dick's friend,
 And they were thick and sweet as honey,
 And Dick owed Pete a pot of money,
 She knew too well how it must end . . .
 And she would rather lie stone-dead
 Beneath the wayside grass than wed
 With leering Pete, and live the life,
 And die the death of his first wife . . .
 And so last night clean-daft with dread
 She'd bundled up a pack and fled . . .

When all the sobbing tale was out
 She dried her eyes and looked about
 As though she'd left all fear behind,
 And out of sight were out of mind.
 Then when the dawn was burning red,
I'm hungry as a hawk ! she said,
 And from the bundle took out bread :

And at the happy end of night
We sat together by a burn
And eat a thick slice turn by turn,
And laughed and kissed between each bite.

Then up again and on our way
We went and tramped the livelong day
The moorland trackways steep and rough,
Though there was little fear enough
That they would follow on our flight.

And then again a shiny night
Among the honey-scented heather,
We wandered in the moonblaze bright
Together through a land of light,
A lad and lass alone with life :
And merrily we laughed together
When, starting up from sleep, we heard
The cock-grouse talking to his wife—
And *Old Fat Pete* she called the bird.

Six months and more have cantered by,
And, winter past, we're out again—
We've left the fat and weatherwise
To keep their coops and reeking sties
And eat their fill of oven-pies,
While we win free and out again
To take potluck beneath the sky
With sun and moon and wind and rain :
Six happy months . . . and yet at night
I've often wakened in affright
And looked upon her lying there
Beside me sleeping quietly,
Adread that when she waked I'd see
The hunted hare within her eyes.

And only last night as I slept
Beneath the shelter of a stack . . .
My hands were hot upon a hare,
Half-strangled, struggling in the snare,
When suddenly her eyes shot back,

Startled and startling, big and black,
And, ere I knew, my grip was slack
And I was clutching empty air . . .
Bolt-upright from my sleep I leapt . . .
Her place was empty in the straw . . .
And then with quaking heart I saw
That she was standing in the night,
A leveret cuddled to her breast . . .
I spoke no word, but as the light
Through banks of Eastern cloud was breaking,
She turned and saw that I was waking,
And told me how she couldn't rest
And, rising in the night, she'd found
This baby hare crouched on the ground,
And she had nursed it quite a while,
But now she'd better let it go . . .
Its mother would be fretting so . . .
A mother's heart . . .

I saw her smile
And look at me with tender eyes ;
And as I looked into their light
My foolish, fearful heart grew wise . . .
And now I know that never there
I'd see again the startled hare
Or need to dread the shades of night.

THOROUGHFARES
(1914)

TO
EDWARD MARSH

SOLWAY FORD

HE greets you with a smile from friendly eyes,
But never speaks nor rises from his bed :
Beneath the green night of the sea he lies,
The whole world's waters weighing on his head.

The empty wain made slowly over the sand,
And he with hands in pockets by the side
Was trudging, deep in dream, the while he scanned
With blue unseeing eyes the far-off tide,
When, stumbling in a hole, with startled neigh
His young horse reared and, snatching at the rein,
He slipped : the wheels crushed on him as he lay ;
Then, tilting over him, the lumbering wain
Turned turtle, as the plunging beast broke free
And made for home ; and, pinioned and half-dead,
He lay and listened to the far-off sea
And seemed to hear it surging overhead
Already, though 'twas full an hour or more
Until high-tide when Solway's shining flood
Should sweep the shallow firth from shore to shore.
He felt a salty tingle in his blood
And seemed to stifle, drowning : then again
He knew that he must lie a lingering while
Before the sea might close upon his pain,
Although the advancing waves had scarce a mile
To travel, creeping nearer inch by inch
With little runs and sallies over the sand.
Cooped in the dark, he felt his body flinch
From each cold wave as it drew nearer hand.
He saw the froth of each oncoming crest
And felt the tugging of the ebb and flow
And waves already breaking over his breast—
Though still far-off they murmured faint and low,

Yet creeping nearer inch by inch, and now
He felt the cold drench of the drowning wave
And the salt cold of death on lips and brow,
And sank and sank . . . while still, as in a grave,
In the close dark beneath the crushing cart
He lay and listened to the far-off sea.
Wave after wave was knocking at his heart
And swishing, swishing, swishing ceaselessly
About the wain—cool waves that never reached
His cracking lips to slake his hell-hot thirst . . .
Shrill in his ears a startled barn-owl screeched . . .
He smelt the smell of oil-cake . . . when there burst
Through the big barn's wide-open door the sea—
The whole sea sweeping on him with a roar . . .
He clutched a falling rafter dizzily . . .
Then sank through drowning deeps to rise no more.

Down, ever down, a hundred years he sank
Through cold green death, ten thousand fathom deep.
His fiery lips deep draughts of cold sea drank
That filled his body with strange icy sleep
Until he felt no longer that numb ache,
The dead-weight lifted from his legs at last—
And yet he gazed with wondering eyes awake
Up the green glassy gloom through which he passed,
And saw far overhead the keels of ships
Grow small and smaller, dwindling out of sight,
And watched the bubbles rising from his lips,
And silver salmon swimming in green night,
And queer big golden bream with scarlet fins
And emerald eyes and fiery-flashing tails,
Enormous eels with purple-spotted skins,
And mammoth unknown fish with sapphire scales
That bore down on him with red jaws agape
Like yawning furnaces of blinding heat ;
And when it seemed to him as though escape
From those hell-mouths were hopeless, his bare feet
Touched bottom, and he lay down in his place
Among the dreamless legion of the drowned,
The calm of deeps unsounded on his face
And calm within his heart, while all around

Upon the midmost ocean's crystal floor
 The naked bodies of dead seamen lay,
 Dropped sheer and clean from hubbub brawl and roar
 To peace too deep for any tide to sway.

.

The little waves were lapping round the cart
 Already when they rescued him from death.
 Life cannot touch the quiet of his heart
 To joy or sorrow as, with easy breath
 And smiling lips, upon his back he lies
 And never speaks or rises from his bed,
 Gazing through those green glooms with happy eyes
 While gold and sapphire fish swim overhead.

A CATCH FOR SINGING

SAID the Old Young Man to the Young Old Man—
Alack and well-a-day !
 Said the Young Old Man to the Old Young Man—
The cherry tree's in flourish !

Said the Old Young Man to the Young Old Man—
The world is growing grey.
 Said the Young Old Man to the Old Young Man—
The cherry tree's in flourish !

Said the Old Young Man to the Young Old Man—
Both flower and fruit decay.
 Said the Young Old Man to the Old Young Man—
The cherry tree's in flourish !

Said the Old Young Man to the Young Old Man—
Alack and well-a-day !
The world is growing grey,
And flower and fruit decay.
Beware Old Man, beware Old Man !
For the end of life is nearing
And the grave yawns by the way. . . .

Said the Young Old Man to the Old Young Man—
I'm a trifle hard of hearing
And can't catch a word you say . . .
But the cherry tree's in flourish !

GERANIUMS

STUCK in a bottle on the window-sill,
 In the cold gaslight burning gaily red
 Against the luminous blue of London night,
 These flowers are mine—while somewhere out of sight
 In some black-throated alley's stench and heat,
 Oblivious of the racket of the street,
 A poor old weary woman lies in bed.

Broken with lust and drink, blear-eyed and ill,
 Her battered bonnet nodding on her head,
 From a dark door she clutched my sleeve and said :
I've sold no bunch to-day, nor touched a bite . . .
Son, buy sixpenn'orth, and 'twill mean a bed.

So, blazing gaily red
 Against the luminous deeps
 Of starless London night
 They burn for my delight,
 While somewhere snug in bed
 A worn old woman sleeps.

And yet to-morrow will these blooms be dead
 With all their lively beauty, and to-morrow
 May end the light lusts and the heavy sorrow
 Of that old body with the nodding head.
 The last oath muttered, the last pint drained deep,
 She'll sink, as Cleopatra sank, to sleep,
 Nor need to barter blossoms for a bed.

THE WHISPERERS

As beneath the moon I walked
 Dog-at-heel my shadow stalked,
 Keeping ghostly company,
 And as we went gallantly
 Down the fell-road, dusty-white,
 Round us in the windy night
 Bracken rushes, bent, and heather
 Whispered ceaselessly together—
*Would he ever journey more,
 Ever stride so carelessly,
 If he knew what lies before
 And could see what we can see ?*

As I listened, cold with dread
 Every hair upon my head
 Strained to hear them talk of me,
 Whispering, whispering ceaselessly—
*Folly's fool the man must be
 Surely, since, though where he goes
 He knows not, his shadow knows ;
 And his secret shadow never
 Utters warning words or ever
 Seeks to save him from his fate,
 Reckless, blindfold, and unknown,
 Till death tells him all too late
 And his shadow walks alone.*

MABEL

WHEN Nigger Dick and Hell-for-Women slouched
 Into the taproom of the Duck and De'il,
 The three Dalmatian pups slunk in at heel
 And down among the slushy sawdust crouched ;
 But Mabel would not leave the windy street
 For any gaudy tavern's reek and heat—
 Not she !—for Mabel was no spotted dog
 To crawl among the steaming muddy feet
 Beneath a bench and slumber like a log.

And so she set her hoofs and stayed outside,
 Though Hell-for-Women pushed the swing-door wide
 And *Mabel darling ! Mabel darling !* cried,
 And Nigger Dick thrust out his head and cursed
 Until his tongue burned with so hot a thirst
 He turned and swore that he'd not split his throat
 To save the soul of any giddy goat.

And then they left her, stubborn wild and white,
 Snuffing the wet air of the windy night ;
 And, as she stood beneath a cold blue star
 That pierced the narrow strip of midnight sky
 Between the sleeping houses black and high,
 The glare and glitter of the reeking bar
 And all the filth and squalor of the street
 Were blotted out . . .

And she was lost between
 The beetling crags of some deep dark ravine
 In Andalusian solitudes of stone,
 A trembling, young, bewildered nanny-goat
 Within the cold blue heart of night alone—
 Until her ears pricked, tingling to a bleat,
 As, far above her on a naked scar,
 The dews of morning dripping from his beard,
 Rejoicing in his strength the herd-king reared,
 Shaking the darkness from his shaggy coat.

THE VIXEN

THE vixen made for Deadman's Flow
 Where not a mare but mine could go ;
 And three hounds only splashed across
 The quaking hags of mile-wide moss—
 Only three of the dead-beat pack
 Scrambled out by Lone Maid's Slack :
 Bolter, Tough, and Ne'er-Die-Nell ;
 But as they broke across the fell
 The tongue they gave was good to hear,
 Lively music clean and clear,

Such as only light-coats make,
Hot-trod through the girth-deep brake.

The vixen, draggled and nigh-spent,
Twisted through the rimy bent
Towards the Christhope Craggs. I thought—
Every earth stopped, winded, caught—
She's a mask and brush ! When white
A squall of snow swept all from sight,
And hoodman-blind Lightfoot and I
Battled with the roaring sky.

When southerly the snow had swept,
Light broke as the vixen crept
Slinking up the stony brae.
On a jutting scar she lay,
Panting, lathered, while she eyed
The hounds that took the stiff brae-side
With yelping music, mad to kill.

Then vixen, hounds, and craggy hill
Were smothered in a blinding swirl ;
And when it passed there stood a girl
Where the vixen late had lain,
Smiling down as I drew rein
Baffled, and the hounds dead-beat,
Fawning at the young girl's feet,
Whimpered, cowed, where her red hair,
Streaming to her ankles bare,
Turned as white among the heather
As the vixen's brush's feather.

Flinching on my flinching mare,
I watched her gaping and astare
As she smiled with red lips wide—
White fangs curving either side
Of her lolling tongue. . . . My thrapple
Felt fear's fang : I strove, agrapple,
Reeling . . . and again blind snow
Closed like night. . . .

No man may know
 How Lightfoot won through Deadman's Flow,
 And naught I knew till in the glow
 Of home's wide door my wife's kind face
 Smiled welcome, and for me the chase—
 The last chase ended. Though the pack
 Through the blizzard struggled back,
 Gone were Bolter, Tough, and Nell,
 Where, the vixen's self can tell !
 Long we sought them high and low
 By Christhope Crag and Deadman's Flow,
 By slack and syke and hag, and found
 Never bone nor hair of hound.

THE LODGING-HOUSE

WHEN up the fretful creaking stair
 From floor to floor
 I creep
 On tiptoe, lest I wake from their first beauty-sleep
 The unknown lodgers, lying layer on layer
 In the packed house from roof to basement
 Behind each landing's unseen door,
 The well-known steps are strangely steep
 And the old stairway seems to soar,
 For my amazement
 Hung in air,
 Flight on flight
 Through pitchy night,
 Evermore and evermore.

And when at last I stand outside
 My garret-door, I hardly dare
 To open it
 Lest, when I fling it wide,
 With candle lit
 And reading in my only chair,
 I find myself already there . . .

And so must crawl back down the sheer black pit
Of Hell's own stair,
Past lodgers sleeping layer on layer,
To seek a home I know not where.

THE ICE

HER day out from the workhouse-ward, she stands,
A grey-haired woman decent and precise,
With prim black bonnet and neat paisley shawl,
Among the other children by the stall,
And with grave relish eats a penny ice.

To wizened toothless gums with quaking hands
She holds it, shuddering with delicious cold,
Nor heeds the jeering laughter of young men—
The happiest, in her innocence, of all :
For, while their insolent youth must soon grow old,
She, who's been old, is now a child again.

WOOL-GATHERING

YOUTH that goes wool-gathering,
Mooning and star-gazing,
Always finding everything
Full of fresh amazing,
Best can meet the moment's need
When the dream brings forth the deed.

He who keeps through all his days
Open eyes of wonder
Is the lord of skyey ways
And the earth thereunder,
For the heart to do and sing
Comes of youth's wool-gathering.

THE TRAMCAR

HUMMING and creaking, the car down the street
 Lumbered and lurched through thunderous gloam,
 Bearing us, spent and dumb with the heat,
 From office and counter and factory home—

Sallow-faced clerks, genteel in black ;
 Girls from the laundries, draggled and dank ;
 Ruddy-faced labourers slouching slack ;
 A broken actor, grizzled and lank ;

A mother with querulous babe on her lap ;
 A schoolboy whistling under his breath ;
 An old man crouched in a dreamless nap ;
 A widow with eyes on the eyes of death ;

A priest ; a sailor with deep-sea gaze ;
 A soldier in scarlet with waxed moustache ;
 A drunken trollop in velvet and lace—
 All silent in that tense hush . . . when a flash

Of lightning shivered the sultry gloom :
 With shattering brattle the whole sky fell
 About us—and, rapt to a dazzling doom,
 We glided on in a timeless spell

Unscathed through deluge and flying fire
 In a magical chariot of streaming glass,
 Cut off from our kind and the world's desire,
 Made one by the awe that had come to pass.

ON THE EMBANKMENT

DOWN on the sunlit ebb with the wind in her sails and free
 Of cable and anchor she swept rejoicing to seek the sea.

And my eyes and my heart swept out with her,
 When at my elbow I felt a stir

And, glancing down, I saw a lad—
A shambling lad with shifty air,
Weak-chested, stunted, and ill-clad—
Who watched her with unseeing stare.

Dull watery grey eyes he had,
Blinking beneath the slouching cap
That hid the low-browed, close-cropped head ;
And as I turned to him he said,
With hopeless hang-dog air—
*Just out of gaol three days ago,
And I'll be back before I know,
For nothing else is left a chap
When once he's been inside . . . and so . . .*
Then dumb he stood with sightless stare
Set on the sunlit windy sail of the far-off boat that, free
Of anchor and cable, still swept on rejoicing to seek the sea.

My heart is a sunlit windy sail :
My heart is a hopeless lad in gaol.

THE DANCERS

'NEATH a thorn as white as snow
High above the peacock sea,
Hither, thither, to and fro
Merrily the grey rats go,
To the song of ebb and flow,
Moving as to melody.

Over gnarled roots high and low,
Twisting, frisking fearlessly,
Six young hearts that needs must know,
When the ragged thorn's in blow,
Spring and spring's desire, and so
Dance above the dancing sea.

THE WIND

To the lean clean land, to the last cold height
 You shall come with a whickering breath,
 From the depths of despair or the depths of delight,
 Stript stark to the wind of death.

And whether you're sinless or whether you've sinned
 It's useless to whimper and whine,
 For the lean clean blade of the cut-throat wind
 Will slit your weasand—and mine.

THE VINDICTIVE STAIRCASE, OR THE
REWARD OF INDUSTRY

IN a doomed and empty house in Houndsditch
 All night long I lie awake and listen,
 While all night the ghost of Mrs. Murphy
 Tiptoes up and down the wheezy staircase,
 Sweeling ghostly grease of quaking candles.

*Mrs. Murphy, timidest of spectres,
 You who were the cheeriest of charers,
 With the heart of innocence and only
 Torn between a zest for priests and porter,
 Mrs. Murphy of the ample bosom,
 Suckler of a score or so of children
 ("Children? Bless you! Why, I've buried six, sir.")—
 Who in forty years wore out three husbands,
 And one everlasting shameless bonnet,
 Which I've little doubt was confined with you—
 Mrs. Murphy, wherefor do you wander,
 Sweeling ghostly grease of quaking candles,
 Up and down the stairs you scrubbed so sorely,
 Scrubbed till they were naked, dank, and aching?*

*Now that you are dead, is this their vengeance?
 Recollecting all you made them suffer
 With your bristled brush and soapy water*

*When you scrubbed them naked, dank, and aching,
Have they power to hold your ghostly footsteps
Chained as to an everlasting treadmill ?*

*Mrs. Murphy, think you 'twould appease them
If I rose now in my shivering nightshirt,
Rose and told them how you, too, had suffered—
You, their seeming tyrant, but their bondsman—
Toiling uncomplaining in their service
Till your knuckles and your knees were knotted
Into writhing fires of red rheumatics,
And how in the end 'twas they who killed you ?*

*Even should their knots still harden to you,
Bow your one and all-enduring bonnet
Till your ear is level with my keyhole
While I whisper ghostly consolation :
Know this house is marked out for the spoiler,
Doomed to fall to Hobnails with his pickaxe ;
And its crazy staircase, chopped to firewood,
Splintered, bundled, burned to smoke and ashes,
Soon shall perish, scattered to the four winds.
Then God rest your spirit, Mrs. Murphy !*

*Yet, who knows ! A staircase . . . Mrs. Murphy,
God forbid that you be doomed to tiptoe
Through eternity, a timid spectre
Sweeling ghostly grease of quaking candles,
Up and down the spectre of a staircase,
While all night I lie awake and listen
In a damned and ghostly house in Houndsditch !*

RAGAMUFFINS

FEW folk like the wind's way,
Fewer folk like mine—
Folk who rise at nine,
Who live to drudge and dine,
Who never see the starry light,
And sleep in the same bed each night

Under the same roof :
 When the rascal wind and I
 Happen to be gadding by,
 Gentlefolk so fat and fine
 Beg to hold aloof,
 Leaving us to starlit beds and husks amid the swine.

Few folk like the wind's song,
 Fewer folk like mine—
 Folk who trudge the trodden way,
 Who keep the track and never stray,
 Who think the sun's for making hay,
 Folk who cannot dance or play,
 Faultless folk and fine.
 Yet the wind and I are gay
 In our ragamuffin way, singing, storm or shine.

IN A RESTAURANT

HE wears a red rose in his buttonhole,
 A city clerk on Sunday dining out ;
 And as the music surges over the din,
 The heady quavering of the violin
 Sings through his blood and puts old cares to rout,
 And tingles quickening through his shrunken soul,

Till he forgets his ledgers and the prim
 Black crabbèd figures and the qualmy smell
 Of ink and musty leather and lead-glaze,
 As, in eternities of summer days,
 He dives through shivering waves or rides the swell,
 On rose-red seas of melody aswim.

THE GREETING

WHAT fettle, mate ? to me he said
 As he went by
 With lifted head
 And laughing eye,

Where, black against the dawning red,
 The pit-heaps cut the sky—
What fettle, mate ?

What fettle, mate ? to him I said
 As he went by
 With shrouded head
 And darkened eye,
 Borne homeward by his marrows, dead,
 Beneath the noonday sky—
What fettle, mate ?

WHEELS

To safety of the curb he thrust the crone,
 When a shaft took him in the back, and prone
 He tumbled heavily, but all unheard,
 Amid the scurry of wheels that crashed and whirled
 About his senseless head—his helmet crushed
 Like crumpled paper by a car that rushed
 Upon him unaware : and as he lay
 He heard again the wheels he'd heard all day
 About him on point-duty . . . only now
 Each red-hot wheel ran searing over his brow—
 A sizzling star with hub and spokes and tyre
 One monstrous Catherine-wheel of sparking fire
 Whirring down windy tunnels of the night. . . .
 That Catherine-wheel, somehow it will not light,
 Fixed to the broken paling, and the pin
 Pricks the boy's finger as he jabs it in :
 He sucks the salty blood—the spiteful thing
 Fires, whizzing, sputtering sparks : he feels them sting
 His wincing cheek, and on the damp night-air
 The stench of burnt saltpetre and singed hair. . . .
 While still he lies and listens without fear
 To the loud traffic rumbling in his ear—
 Wheels rumbling in his ear and through his brain
 For evermore, a never-ending train
 Of scarlet postal-vans that whirl, one red
 Perpetual hot procession, through his head—

His head that's just a clanking, clattering mill
Of grinding wheels . . . and down an endless hill
After his hoop he runs, a little lad
Barefooted 'neath the stars, in nightshirt clad—
And stumbles into bed—the stars all gone,
Though in his head the hoop keeps running on
And on and on : his head, grown big and wide,
Holds all the windy night and stars inside, . . .
And still within a hair's breadth of his ear
The crunch and gride of wheels rings sharp and clear—
Huge lumbering wagons, crusted axle-deep
With country marl, their drivers half-asleep
Against green toppling mounds of cabbages
Still crisp with dewy airs, or stacks of cheese
Smelling of Arcady, till all the sky
In clouds of cheese and cabbages rolls by—
Great golden cheeses wheeling through the night
And giant cabbages of emerald light
That tumble after, scattering crystal drops. . . .
While in his ear that grinding never stops—
Wheels grinding asphalt . . . then a high-piled wain
Of mignonette in boxes . . . and again,
A baby at his father's cottage door
He toddles, treading on his pinafore,
And tumbles headlong in a bed of bloom,
Half-smothered in the deep sweet honeyed gloom
Of crushed wet blossom, and the hum of bees,
Big bumble-bees that buzz through flowery trees,
Grows furious . . . changing to a roar of wheels
And honk of hooting horns : and now he feels
That all the cars in London filled with light
Are bearing down upon him through the night,
As out of hall and theatre there pour
White-shouldered women, ever more and more,
Bright-eyed, with flashing teeth, borne in a throng
Of purring, glittering cars ten thousand strong—
Each drowsy dame and eager chattering lass
Laughing unheard within her box of glass. . . .
And then great darkness and a clanging bell,
Clanging beneath the hollow vault of hell
Aglow like burnished copper, and a roar
Of wheels and wheels and wheels for evermore,

As engine after engine crashes by
With clank and rattle under that red sky,
Dropping a train of burning coals behind
That scorch his eyeballs till he lies half-blind,
Smouldering to cinder in a vasty night
Of wheeling worlds and stars in whirring flight,
And suns that blaze in thunderous fury on
For ever and for ever, yet are gone
Ere he can gasp to see them . . . head to heels,
Slung round a monstrous red-hot hub that wheels
Across infinity with spokes of fire
That dwindle slowly till the shrinking tyre
Is clamped like aching ice about his head. . . .

He smells clean acid smells, and safe in bed
He wakens in a lime-washed ward, to hear
Somebody moaning almost in his ear,
And knows that it's himself that moans ; and then,
Battling his way back to the world of men,
He sees with leaden eyelids opening wide
His young wife gravely knitting by his side.

PROMETHEUS

ALL day beneath the bleak indifferent skies,
Broken and blind, a shivering bag of bones,
He trudges over icy paving-stones
And *Matches ! Matches ! Matches ! Matches !* cries.

And now beneath the dismal dripping night
And shadowed by a deeper night he stands—
And yet he holds within his palsied hands
Quick fire enough to set his world alight.

NIGHT

SUDDENLY kindling the skylight's pitchy square
The eyes of a cat, sinister, glassy, and green,
Caught by a trick of the light in a senseless stare. . . .
And the powers of the older night, abhorrent, obscene,

Each from his den of darkness and loathly lair,
 Slink to my bedside and gibber and mow and fill
 My heart with the Fear of the Fen and the Dread of the Hill,
 And the Terror that steals by night through the Wood of Doom,
 And things that are headless and nameless throng my room—
 The cold webbed fingers of witches are in my hair ;
 The clammy lips of the warlock are clenched to mine ;
 The eel of the bottomless pit of Deadman's Bog
 Slithers, an icy spiral, about my spine ;
 A corpse-clutch freezes my midriff ; the foul reek of Fog. . . .

When my hand is licked by the warm wet tongue of my dog ;
 The eyes blink out, and Horror slinks back to her den,
 And I breathe again.

ON HAMPSTEAD HEATH

AGAINST the green flame of the hawthorn tree
 His scarlet tunic burns,
 And livelier than the green sap's mantling glee
 The spring fire tingles through him headily,
 As quivering he turns
 And stammers out the old amazing tale
 Of youth and April weather,
 While she, with half-breathed jests that sobbing fail,
 Sits tight-lipped, quaking, eager-eyed, and pale
 Beneath her purple feather.

A VISION IN A TEASHOP

HIS hair lit up the teashop like a fire,
 The naked flame of youth made manifest—
 Young hunger's unappeasable desire
 Devouring cakes and cream with reckless zest :

While, cheek by jowl, an old man, bald and blind
 And peaked and withered as a waning moon,
 With toothless mumbling gums and wandering mind,
 Supped barley-water from a tremulous spoon.

I turned a moment, and the man was gone ;
 And as I looked upon the red-haired boy
 About him in a blinding glory shone
 The Sons of Morning singing together for joy.

LINES

*Addressed to the Spectre of an Elderly Gentleman, recently demised,
 Whom the Author had once observed performing a Benevolent
 Office in the Vicinity of Holborn, W.C.*

I SAW you, seated on a horse's head
 While the blaspheming carter cut the traces,
 Obese, white-waistcoated, and newly fed,
 Through bland indifferent monocle surveying
 The gaping circle of indifferent faces.

And now the news has come that you are dead
 I see you, while they cut the tangled traces,
 On your own hearse's fallen horse's head,
 Through bland indifferent monocle surveying
 The unseeing circle of funereal faces.

THE DREADNOUGHT

BREASTING the tide of the traffic the " Dreadnought " comes,
 Beribboned and gay, the first of the holiday brakes
 Brimful of broken old women, a parish's mothers,
 Bearing them out for the day from grey alleys and slums—
 A day in the Forest of Epping grown green for their sakes.

Listless and stolid they crouch, everlastingly tired,
 Mere bundles of patience outworn, half-deaf and half-blind,
 Save only one apple-cheeked grannie more brisk than the others
 Who, remembering with youth in her heart and the old dreams
 desired,
 Sits kissing her hand to the drivers who follow behind.

SIGHT

By the lamplit stall I loitered, feasting my eyes
On colours ripe and rich for the heart's desire—
Tomatoes redder than Krakatoa's fire,
Oranges like old sunsets over Tyre,
And apples golden-green as the glades of Paradise.

And as I lingered lost in divine delight,
My heart thanked God for the goodly gift of sight
And all youth's lively senses keen and quick . . .
When suddenly behind me in the night
I heard the tapping of a blind man's stick

THE GORSE

IN dream, again within the clean cold hell
Of glazed and aching silence he was trapped,
And, closing in, the blank walls of his cell
Crushed stifling on him . . . when the bracken snapped,
Caught in his clutching fingers, and he lay
Awake upon his back among the fern
With free eyes travelling the wide blue day
Unhindered, unremembering, while a burn
Tinkled and gurgled somewhere out of sight
Unheard of him till, suddenly aware
Of its cold music, shivering in the light,
He raised himself and with far-ranging stare
Looked all about him ; and with dazed eyes wide
Saw, still as in a numb unreal dream,
Black figures scouring a far hillside,
With now and then a sunlit rifle's gleam,
And knew the hunt was hot upon his track—
Yet scarcely seemed to mind somehow just then . . .
But kept on wondering why they looked so black
On the hot hillside, all those little men
Who scurried round like beetles—twelve all told . . .
He counted them twice over and began
A third time reckoning them, but could not hold
His starved wits to the business, while they ran

So brokenly, and always stuck at "five" . . .
And *One, two, three, four, five* a dozen times -
He muttered . . . *Can you catch a fish alive?*
Sang mocking echoes of old nursery-rhymes
Through the strained tingling hollow of his head.
And now, almost remembering, he was stirred
To pity them, and wondered if they'd fed
Since he had, or if, ever since they'd heard
Two nights ago the sudden signal-gun
That raised alarm of his escape, they too
Had fasted in the wilderness and run,
With nothing but the thirsty wind to chew,
And nothing in their bellies but a fill
Of cold peat-water, till their heads were light. . . .

The crackling of a rifle on the hill
Rang in his ears and, stung to headlong flight,
He started to his feet and through the brake
He plunged in panic, heedless of the sun
That burned his cropped head to a red-hot ache,
Still racked with crackling echoes of the gun.

Then suddenly the sun-enkindled fire
Of gorse upon the moor-top caught his eye,
And that gold glow held all of his desire
As, like a witless flame-bewildered fly,
He blundered towards the league-wide yellow blaze
And tumbled headlong on the spikes of bloom,
And rising, bruised and bleeding and adaze,
Struggled through clutching spines—the dense sweet fume
Of nutty acrid scent like poison stealing
Through his hot blood: the bristling yellow glare
Spiking his eyes with fire till he went reeling,
Stifling and blinded, on—and did not care
Though he were taken—wandering round and round,
Jerusalem the Golden quavering shrill,
Changing his tune to *Tommy Tiddler's Ground*,
Till, just a lost child on the dazzling hill
Bewildered in a glittering golden maze
Of stinging scented fire, he dropped, quite done,
A shrivelling wisp within a world ablaze
Beneath a blinding sky, one blaze of sun.

THE SALTMARSHES

OVER the fog-smothered marshes we splashed on our way to the
quay

Under a blind yellow moon bemused in a mizzle of rain,
When low through the yelping of gulls and the muffled wash-wash
of the sea

Suddenly shuddered a voice—the voice of a creature in pain.

Cold at my heart, I stopped dead in the causeway and, listening
hard,

I muttered, and half to myself—*It's surely a human moaning !*

But still stumping steadily on Pete grumbled—*It's naught but the
groaning—*

The groaning and fash of a young cow calving in Angerton's Yard.

Yet again as we steered for the pots through the breathless and
mist-moithered night,

Coldly over my heart that shuddering, smothering cry,

Low through the salty fret and the dazzle of drizzly light

Echoing, sobbed and moaned, then sank to a shivering sigh ;

And under my breath as I stooped again to the oars, rowing
hard,

I muttered once more to myself—*It's surely a human moaning !*

And only the oars in the rowlocks creaked in answer—*It's naught
but the groaning—*

The groaning and fash of a young cow calving in Angerton's Yard.

Dead they found her next day, the mothering girl, in the dyke,
Strayed from the track in the fog and foundered, sucked down in
the gloam.

For lightness of heart and for laughter none ever had known her
like :

Heavy and quiet she lay, grave-eyed, as they carried her home ;

And the trudge of the bearers' feet to my icy-cold heart beating
hard

As it still muttered over and over—*It's surely a human moaning !*

Mocked with a splashing thud-thud, as in answer—*It's naught but
the groaning—*

*The groaning and fash of a young cow calving in Angerton's
Yard.*

And ever across the saltmarshes, making our way to the quay
By moonlight or starlight or murk, in fog or fair weather or rain,
Low through the yelping of gulls and the whisper or crash of the sea
Suddenly shudders a voice—the voice of a creature in pain ;
And vainly I cover my ears with my hands as my heart listens hard,
Muttering and mumbling too late—*It's surely a human moaning !*
Bitterly mocking itself in answer—*It's naught but the groaning—*
The groaning and fash of a young cow calving in Angerton's Yard.

BORDERLANDS
(1914)

Hallo, my fancy, whither wilt thou go?

WILLIAM CLELAND.

THE QUEEN'S CRAGS

SCENE.—*The Queen's Crag, a fantastic group of rocks and boulders on the fells. MICHAEL CROZIER, a young hind, lies in the evening glow at the foot of the tallest crag, with a far-away look in his eyes. Presently GEORGE DODD, an old hind, enters and stops on seeing MICHAEL.*

GEORGE. Of all the lazy louts !
It's here, then, that you moon away the evenings,
Stretched like a collie basking in the sun,
Your noble self for company ?
At your age, Michael lad,
I'd have thought shame to find myself alone
A night like this,
And such a lass as Peggy lonesome too.
I wasted little time when I was young,
And lost no summer evenings by myself :
I always was a lad among the lasses,
And not a moony, moping gowk like you :
Sunlight, moonlight, starlight, dark,
I never missed the screeching of the owls,
Nor listened to it lonesome.
But you, I've never seen you with a lass,
Though Peggy Haliburton, she . . .
Lad, take your pleasure while you're young
And summer nights be fine.
Though youth and summer nights seem long enough—
Long enough to last for ever,
For ever and a day,
Before you've looked about a bit
Old age and winter are upon you :
To-day you're lithe and lusty,
And to-morrow
A grizzled, pithless, aching bag-of-bones.

And Peggy Haliburton too,
 The lass was made for love and summer nights ;
 Yet she's out walking with herself,
 And no one by to see her but the peewits
 Or maybe a cock grouse or so—
 A bonnie young thing wasting.

*(He pauses, looking at MICHAEL who pays little heed, but
 still lies with a far-away look in his eyes.)*

But happen, Michael, you're like me
 And can't abide red hair ?
 I never liked a red-haired wench
 If there were any other by.
 Red—it's the colour of the fox and kestrel
 And stoat and weasel and such thieves and vermin.
 And as for stock, if I could have my way
 I shouldn't have a red beast on the farm :
 I'd never let a chestnut stallion whinny
 Within a mile of Skarlindyke :
 I'd sell all chestnut colts and fillies :
 The red bull too should go ;
 And no red heifer should come nigh the byres.
 I'd have all black, coal-black—
 Black stallions and black mares,
 Black bulls, black stirks and heifers ;
 All black, save tups and ewes—
 I'm somehow not so partial to black sheep.
 But in this world we cannot all be farmers.
 And lords of all creation :
 Still even hinds may have their fancies,
 And you and I, lad, can't abide red hair :
 And so red Peggy walks alone ?
 Ay ! and it seems that hinds can hold their tongues—
 At least the youngsters can ;
 For my old tongue keeps wagging,
 And wags to little purpose, seemingly.
 It must have lost its sting,
 Or Peggy's not in favour.

(A pause.)

Well, Mister Mum, you've chosen a snug corner
 To stretch your lazy bones in.

(Sitting down by MICHAEL with his back against the rock.)

I think I'll bear you company awhile,

If you can call a hedgehog company,
Tight-curved and bristles prickling !
Still, though you mayn't be over-lively,
You're livelier than Myself :
I find him but glum company—
A grumpy, sulky beggar
Who keeps on telling me I'm getting old
And 'minding me of happiness gone by.
Myself and I were never fellows—
But ill-yoked at the best of times,
We seldom pulled together,
And Lord ! the times that we've upset the cart !
So you must serve to keep the peace between us
By listening to my chatter.
I'm always happiest talking,
For then I needn't listen to Myself :
Though I, when I was your age, Michael,
I should have scorned an old man's company
While any lass—
And on Midsummer Eve !

*(He pauses again, then resumes, pointing to a pillared rock
standing apart from the others.)*

So yon's the tooth, chipped out of the Queen's comb
When Arthur pitched a rock at her
While she was combing out her yellow hair,
And he, at his own Crag a mile away !
It must have been a spanker of a comb
To bear so brave a tooth !
I wonder what she'd said, to make him pitch it—
Though likely she'd said nothing,
But just sat combing out her yellow hair,
And combing, combing, combing.
A woman with a devil in her tongue
When she plays mum is far more aggravating.
Sometimes when Susan sits and combs her hair
At night like Arthur's queen,
And combs, and combs,
Till I'm half-mad with watching from the bed,
I only stop Myself—
The surly chap who wants the light out,
Just in the nick of time
To loose the pillow from his clutch.

King Arthur must have been a handsome lad . .
To chuck a pebble that size near a mile :
But there were giants in those days,
And he . . .

MICHAEL. A lie !

GEORGE. A lie ? Of course it's all a lie,
But it's a brave lie, Michael.
I doubt if there were ever king and queen
In these outlandish parts.

MICHAEL. There was a queen,
Though she was not a giant :
She was no bigger than . . .
Than you or me . . .

Or Peggy—she was nearer Peggy's height.

GEORGE. You seem to know a deal about her, Michael :
Just Peggy's height ?
And red-haired too, I'll warrant ?
You've found your tongue,
And got it pat—
And all the gospel-truth !
How do you come by so much truth, I wonder ?
Scarcely by honest means I doubt :
And how do you know . . .

MICHAEL. Because I've seen her.

GEORGE. Who ?

MICHAEL. The Queen.

GEORGE. You've seen the Queen ?
Well, that's a brave one, Michael !
Myself can sometimes tell a little one,
But he was ever but a craven liar—
His were but cheepy bantams barely hatched,
While yours, why it's a strutting cock, and crowing,
Comb pricked and hackles quivering !
There's nothing like a big bold brazen lie
To warm the blood . . .

MICHAEL. I'm telling truth :
I've seen her twice.

GEORGE. Nay, stop before you spoil it all :
A lie blown out too big will burst.

MICHAEL. It is no lie :
I saw the Queen herself.

GEORGE. You saw her—where ?

MICHAEL. I saw her here.

GEORGE. Here—in the Crag ?

I trust she's not here now,
And listening down behind the rock—
Lord, if she'd heard Myself about the combing !
But queens should be above eavesdropping,
And know the luck of listeners.
Though how d'you know her, lad, for Arthur's Queen ?
Did she sing out—

Hi, lad ! I'm Arthur's Queen !

MICHAEL. She wore a crown—
A golden crown . . .

GEORGE. I saw a Queen once with a golden crown,
And sitting on a golden throne
Set high on a monster golden ball,
Drawn in a golden chariot through the streets
By four-and-twenty little piebald ponies,
At Hexham on a fairday long ago—
Ay, long ago in my young days
When circuses were circuses.
They made a brave procession through the town
To draw the folk in after them—
Though outside shows are usually the bravest . . .
But not that time . . .
She was a Queen, a black-eyed gipsy Queen . . .
Black eyes that sparked . . .
And tilted chin . . .
You never saw . . .

MICHAEL. Mine was no circus-queen.
I saw her first when I was but a boy,
Six years ago to-day—Midsummer Eve.
I'd spent the whole day playing round the Crag
At kings and castles,
Crowning or killing
Or conquering myself,
Or putting black-faced bands
Of robber-sheep to rout,
Or seeking to take unawares
Some traitor stoat or weasel
That spied on my dominions :
When ere I knew,
The sky was black,

And broke in flame,
And burst in thunder . . .
And rain, such rain . . .
Lightning, flash on flash . . .
Thunder, brattle after brattle . . .
Rain and rain . . .
You never saw such rain—
One pelting, crashing, teeming, drenching downpour.
Soaked to the skin in no time
And scared out of my senses,
I crept into a hole among the rocks—
A hole I'd never spied before,
No bigger than a fox's earth.
I had to wriggle on my belly
To squeeze myself in head-first,
And half-expecting every moment
To feel a vixen's teeth,
Though more I feared the lightning at my heels :
When all at once my arms were free,
And, lifting up my head, I found
I'd almost crawled into a chamber—
A big square chamber in the rock
That I had ne'er heard tell of—
Four blue and shiny walls that soared
Sheer to the sky, a still and starry sky,
Though in the world without black storm was raging.
But I'd no eyes for stars,
Nor even wits to wonder at the quiet :
My eyes were on the Queen
Who sat beside a hearth of burning peats,
Right in the middle of the chamber,
A golden crown upon her golden head :
And she was spinning golden wool
That flickered in the firelight
Until it seemed that she was spinning flame
Or her own fire-bright hair.

GEORGE. Red hair ! And she'd red hair ?
Then you had only snoozed
And dreamt of Peggy.
I saw my Queen by daylight.

MICHAEL. Peggy !
I tell you 'twas the Queen :

I saw her plainly as I see yon rabbit.
She wore a furry cloak of weasel skins,
Or something like,
Though round the neck 'twas white—
White as yon rabbit's scut,
For it was mortal cold in that stone chamber.

GEORGE. Was anybody with her ?

MICHAEL. I only saw the Queen,
And her but for a moment.
She lifted up her eyes,
And I was frightened
And wriggled backwards like an adder
Till I was in the storm again ;
And then I scuttled home,
A rabbit to its warren,
Across the splashy heather—
The lightning playing round my heels,
The thunder rattling round my head,
Though it was not the lightning or the thunder
That scared me now . . .
I'd not a thought for them . . .
My heart was flying from that quiet chamber,
That stone-cold chamber roofed with quiet stars . . .
And from the eyes . . .
The eyes I had not seen.

GEORGE. And where's this stony chamber, then ?

MICHAEL. I never found the way to it again,
Though I've ransacked the Crag for it
Since I grew big and bolder.

GEORGE. A vixen in her den,
For she'd be red enough—
Yet, you'd have felt her teeth for certain !
It must have been a dream.

MICHAEL. I might have thought so too,
Had I not seen the Queen again.

GEORGE. Again ? . . .
I saw my Queen again too,
But what was your Queen's name ?

MICHAEL. Queen Guinevere.

GEORGE. Mine had a braver name :
They called her Donna Bella di Braganza,
Castilian Queen of the Equestrian World.

I spelled it out upon the rainbow bills
The clown who wagged the tail of the procession
Was scattering from his donkey-cart.
I saw my Queen again—
My gipsy Queen,
My black-haired, black-eyed gipsy !
You and your red-haired Queens !
I'd give a world of red-haired Guineveres
To see those gipsy eyes again. . . .
I smell the sawdust now . . .
And oranges . . .
'Twas in the tent . . .
She'd doffed her robes and crown . . .
I knew her by the flashing of her eyes,
Tripping nimbly into the ring,
So brave in yellow silk, skin-fitting silk
Yellow as dandelions,
And sprinkled all with spangles ;
And yellow ribbons in her hair,
Her jet-black hair that hung about her shoulders.
I see her tripping now into the ring
With flashing eyes and teeth,
Clean-limbed and mettlesome as the coal-black mare,
Coal-black from mane to fetlocks,
That pawed and champed to greet her—
And there's naught bonnier than a bonnie mare . . .
She clapped its glossy neck ;
It nuzzled her :
Then ere I knew
She'd lighted on its flanks,
Nimble and springy as a thistledown,
And they were racing round the ring together,
She, standing tiptoe
And with ne'er a rein,
A straw between her teeth,
Her flashing teeth . . .
And tilted chin . . .
And flashing eyes . . .
Her beautiful long hair, as black and silky,
As black and silky as the mare's long mane,
Was streaming out behind . . .
And ribbons streaming . . .

Spangles sparkling . . .
Sawdust flying,
Whips a-cracking,
Music playing . . .
And now she sprang
Through flaming hoops,
And my heart through the fire with her,
And lighted on the steamy flanks,
And on and on
And round and round the ring
Till I was dazzled dizzy
And out of breath, but watching her.
And what with crack of whips . . .
Thudding thresh of hoofs . . .
Smell of spurting sawdust . . .
Crash of drums and trumpets . . .
Flaming hoops of fire . . .
Flying hair,
Yellow ribbons,
Flashing teeth,
And flashing eyes—
My blood was mad, was mad for her :
I wanted to be flying round,
For ever flying round with her,
For ever and for ever . . .
I wanted her
As I have never wanted woman
Before or since. . . .

(A pause.)

And yet I've little doubt
That she'd have been a poor hand with the porridge,
And poorer at the milking,
Though she could manage horses ;
And happen 'twas as well
That I walked home that night with Susan.
Within nine months we'd wedded.
There's naught amiss with Susan's porridge,
And she could milk a stone.
She's been a good and careful wife enough :
She never spares herself—nor me.
Though I dare say I'm even more a trial
To her than to myself ;

And though I'm often harking back
And sometimes hanker . . .
Somehow I cannot see the Donna Bella
In yellow skin-tights cleaning out the byre.
And yet !

MICHAEL. I saw Queen Guinevere again
Three years ago upon Midsummer Eve.
She sat upon a little hill and sang
And combed her long red hair beside the lough—
Just sitting like a leveret in the sun
To sleek its fur—
And all about her grey snipe darted drumming.
She combed her long red hair
That tumbled down her shoulders,
Her long hair red as bracken,
As bracken in October,
And with a gleam of wind in it,
A light of running water.
Her crown was in the heather at her feet,
And now and then a snipe would perch upon it
And with his long neb preen his gleaming feathers
As if to mock the Queen,
Queen Guinevere a-combing her long hair
That tumbled over a gown of blue—
As blue and shimmery as a kingfisher . . .
And with a light of running water :
And as she sang 'twas like the curlew calling,
And rippled through my heart like curlew calling,
Like curlew calling in the month of April,
And with a clear cool noise of running water.
I dropped upon my belly in the bracken,
And lay and watched her, combing her red hair,
And hearkened to her singing . . .
And I was sorry when she'd done at last
And took her long red hair and twisted it
And fixed it with a golden pin.
Though she'd but little need of crown
Whose hair was golden crown enough,
She stooped to take her gold crown from the heather
And set it on her brow,
Then stood upright,
Stood like a birch-tree in the wind,

A silver birch-tree in the sunset wind
 That ripples through its leaves like running water—
 The little snipe about her drumming . . .
 And then I looked into her eyes,
 Looked into golden pools,
 Pools golden 'neath October bracken—
 And into the heart of fire . . .

(*A pause.*)

A shrew's cold muzzle touched my hand
 Among the bracken, startling me . . .
 And she was gone . . .

GEORGE (*after a pause*). And so the leveret bolted !
 You never saw her more ?

So all tales end—

At least the true tales told by life itself.
 Though I . . . I saw my Queen again . . .

Yet . . . with a difference. . . .

'Twas at the next fair after we were married :

I thought I'd like a glimpse of her again,

Though I had much ado persuading Susan ;

She'd never been inside a circus,

And thought it sorry waste of silver :

But once inside the tent

She liked it well enough,

And gaped and grinned her money's worth.

And I—I sat and waited,

And waited for my gipsy . . .

And snuffed the smell of sawdust,

While Susan giggled at the clown—

A yellow-legged old corncrake—

And nudged me with her elbow,

And asked me if I'd ever heard the like.

But I'd no ears or eyes

For any save my gipsy . . .

And she . . . she never came.

Another woman rode the coal-black mare—

A red-haired jumping-jenny :

And there was cracking whips,

And sawdust flying,

Drums and trumpets,

Flaming hoops

And all the razzle-dazzle . . .

But not my black-eyed gipsy.
And I sat waiting still when all was over
Until the tent was empty . . .
Sat waiting for my Donna Bella . . .
Till Susan tugged me by the jacket
And asked if I'd sit gaping there all night.
She got me out at last—
And then . . . I met her . . .
Met her face to face,
My gipsy Queen!
But oh! . . . how changed . . .
Except her eyes. . . .
I knew her by her eyes,
For they still flashed and sparkled,
Though she was bent and hunched
And hobbled with a crutch.
She'd had a tumble since I'd seen her flying
Around the ring as light as thistledown.
She clutched me with a skinny hand,
Wanting to tell my fortune,
But Susan wouldn't let her,
And said a married man had got his fortune,
So needn't waste his earnings.
The gipsy bit the straw between her teeth,
Her flashing teeth,
And, tilting her proud chin,
She laughed at that with merry eyes
Twinkling 'neath her yellow kerchief—
Dandelion yellow,
Bound about her jet-black hair,
The hair that I'd seen flying free . . .
And when she laughed
And looked into my eyes
The heather was afire!
I could have caught her to me
There and then—
Whipped her up and run with her
To the world's end—and over! . . .
But Susan . . . dragging on my arm . . .
Ay! broken as she was
And hunched and hobbling,
I would have wedded her outright

Had it not been for Susan . . .

I lost her in the crowd . . .

And never saw her more . . .

(A pause.)

And so went home to decent porridge.

And 'twas as well maybe.

A man must have his meat if he's to work,

And victuals count for much :

And Susan's ever been a careful wife,

And had no easy time of it.

(A pause.)

But love's a queer thing, Michael—

It comes to you . . . like that! *(striking his hands sharply together)*

I've known a man walk seven miles each night

To see a woman's shadow on the blind :

And in the end

It's one, and one alone, that holds you,

Be it Donna Bella, Guinevere, or Peggy.

(A pause.)

But you—you never saw your carrotty Queen

Combing her long red hair again, I'll warrant.

MICHAEL *(speaking slowly as in a trance)*.

I saw her once, upon Midsummer Eve,

Six years ago . . .

I saw her twice, upon Midsummer Eve,

Three years ago . . .

I'll see her thrice . . .

GEORGE. And it's Midsummer Eve !

MICHAEL *(listening)*. And nigh the hour . . .

And hark, the snipe a-drumming !

GEORGE. You cannot think . . .

It's all a pack of lies . . .

Or else you're daft, clean daft !

Your eyes are queer and wild . . .

You do not see her now ?

No ! No ! I thought not :

It's all stuff and nonsense

Your silly tale about a red-haired Queen

Who's been dead dust a thousand years or more.

MICHAEL *(leaping to his feet)*. She's coming . . . coming
now . . .

GEORGE (*leaping up too, and gripping MICHAEL'S arm*).
No! No!

You're crazy surely . . .

Yet . . . queer things happen on the fells at times—

And on Midsummer Eve . . .

MICHAEL (*listening more intently*). She's drawing slowly
nearer . . .

I hear her silks arustling through the grass. . . .

GEORGE (*listening*). I seem to hear . . .

What are you gaping at?

MICHAEL (*looking up*). The Queen! The Queen!

*(They both stand spellbound, gazing at a woman standing
on the crest of a boulder, burning like a golden flame in
the last rays of the setting sun. Presently, looking down
and seeing them, she laughs.)*

GEORGE (*shaking himself, while MICHAEL still stands spell-
bound*).

It's Peggy Haliburton after all!

(To PEGGY) Why, Michael said 'twas Arthur's Queen—

He called her some outlandish name,

And said she'd long red foxy hair,

And eyes like pools,

And sang just like the curlew.

But he'll be telling you himself—

For all along I knew 'twas you he meant.

Men's tongues wag madly on Midsummer Eve,

And I've been talking too,

A pack of nonsense,

As Michael here could tell you

If he'd not too much sense to heed

An old man's witless blethering.

Well, I had best be going

And getting home to Susan:

She doesn't hold with owls and such-like.

BLOODYBUSH EDGE

Bloodybush Edge is a remote spot on the borderline between England and Scotland, marked by a dumpy obelisk on which is inscribed an obsolete scale of tolls. A rough, sandy road runs down across the dark moors into England on the one hand, and into Scotland on the other. DAFT DICK, a fantastic figure, half gamekeeper, half tramp in appearance, dressed as he is in the cast-off clothes of country gentlemen, swings up the road from the Scottish side, singing :

*Now Liddisdale has ridden a raid,
But I wat they better hae stayed at hame,
For Michael o' Winfield, he lies dead,
And Jock o' the Side is prisoner ta'en.*

(He stands for a moment looking across the fells, which are very dark in spite of the starry sky, then flings himself down in the heather with his back to the obelisk, and lights his pipe. Presently he sees a dark figure stumbling with uncertain steps across the boggy moor, and watches it keenly as it approaches, until it reaches the road, when he sees that it is a strange man, evidently a tramp.)

TRAMP. A track at last, thank God !

DICK. Ay, there be whiles

When beaten tracks are welcome.

TRAMP (*starting in surprise*). Who the . . . Oh !
I didn't count on having company
Again in this world, and when I heard a voice
I thought it must be another ghost. It's queer
Hearing a voice bleat when you haven't heard
A mortal voice for ages. I've not changed
A word with a soul since noon, and when you spoke
It gave me quite a turn. A feather—Lord !
But it wouldn't take the shadow of a feather
To knock me over : I'm in such a stickle,
Dead-beat and fit to drop. To drop !—I've dropped
A hundred times already—humpty-dumpty !
Why, I've been tumbling in and out black holes
Since sunset on that God-forsaken moor,
Half-crazed with fear of . . . Ah, you've got a light :
And I've been tramping all the livelong day

With a pipeful of comfort in my waistcoat-pocket,
 And would have swopped the frizzling sun itself
 For a match to kindle it. Thanks, mate, that's better.
 And now what was it you were saying, Old Cock,
 When I mistook you then for Hamlet's father ?
 Lord ! if you'd seen him at The Elephant
 In queer blue sheeny armour, you'd have shivered.
I am thy father's spirit, he says, like that
 Down in his boots. But you were saying—

DICK.

There are times

When beaten tracks are welcome.

TRAMP.

True for you,

And truer by a score of bumps for me.
 My neck's been broken half-a-dozen times :
 My body's just an aching bag-of-bones :
 I'm one big bruise from top to toe, as though
 I'd played in the Cup Final—as the ball :
 And mud, I'm mud to the eyes and over, carrying
 Half of the country that I've passed through on me.
 My best suit too !—and I was always faddy
 About my clothes : my mother used to call me
 Finicky Fred. If she could see me now !
 I couldn't count the times that I've pitched headlong
 Into black bog.

DICK.

Ay, there are clarty bits

In Foulmire Moss. But what set you stravaging
 Among the peat-hags at this time of night ?
 Unless you know the tracks by heart . . .

TRAMP.

I know

The Old Kent Road by heart.

DICK.

The Old Kent Road ?

TRAMP. London, S.E. You've heard of London, likely ?

DICK. Ay, ay, I've heard . . .

TRAMP.

Well, mate, I've walked from London.

DICK. You've walked from London here ?

TRAMP.

Well, not to-day.

It must be near three hundred mile, I reckon—

Just five weeks yesterday since I set out :

But, as you say, I've walked from London here,

Though where " here " is the devil only knows !

What is here called, if it has any name

But Back o' Beyond, or World's End, eh ?

DICK.

You're sitting

On Bloodybush Edge this moment.

TRAMP.

To think of that !

Bloodybush Edge ! And that's what I have come to,
While all' my friends, the men and women I know,
Are strolling up and down the Old Kent Road,
Chattering and laughing by the lighted stalls
And the barrows of bananas and oranges,
Or sitting snugly in bars ; and here am I
On Bloodybush Edge, talking to Hamlet's father.

DICK. My name's Dick Dodd.

TRAMP.

Well, no offence, Old Cock !

And Hamlet's father was a gentleman,
A king of ghosts, and, Lord ! but he could groan.
My name's . . . Jack Smith ; and Jack would give a sovereign,
A sovereign down, if he could borrow it,
And drinks all round, and here's to you and you !
Just to be sitting in The Seven Stars
And listening to the jabber, just to snuff
A whiff of the smoke and spirit. Seven Stars !
I'm lodging under stars enough to-night—
Seven times seven hundred. . . .

DICK.

Often I have tried

To count them, lying here upon my back,
But they're too many for me. Just when you think
You've reckoned all between two sprigs of heather,
One tumbles from its place, or else a hundred
Spring out of nowhere. If you only stare
Hard at the darkest patch for long enough,
You'll see that it's all alive with little stars,
And there isn't any dark at all.

TRAMP.

No dark !

If you'd been tumbling into those black holes,
You'd not think overmuch of these same stars.
I couldn't see my hand before me. Stars!
Give me the lamps along the Old Kent Road,
And I'm content to leave the stars to you.
They're well enough, but hung a trifle high
For walking with clean boots. Now a lamp or so . . .

DICK. If it's so fine and brave, the Old Kent Road,
How is it you came to leave it?

TRAMP.

I'd my reasons.

DICK. Reasons ! Queer reasons surely to set you trapesing
Over Foulmire in the dark—though I could travel
The fells from here to Cheviot blindfold—ay,
And never come a cropper.

TRAMP. 'Twas my luck,
My lovely luck, and naught to do with reasons—
My gaudy luck and the devilish dust and heat
And hell's own thirst that drove me, and too snug
A bed among the heather. Oversleeping,
That's always played the mischief with me. Once
I slept till three in the morning, and . . .

DICK. Till three ?
You're an early bird, if you call that oversleeping.
Folk hereabout are mostly astir by three,
But city folk I thought . . .

TRAMP. I'm on the night-shift.
I sleep by day, for the most part, like a cat.
That's why, though dog-tired now, I couldn't sleep
A wink though you paid me gold down.

DICK. Night-shift, you !
And what may your job be ? Cat's night-shift, likely,
As well as day's sleep !

TRAMP. Now look here, Old Cock,
There's just one little thing that we could teach you
Down London way. Why, even babes in London
Know better than to ask too many questions.
You ask no questions and you'll hear no lies
Is the first lesson that's hammered into them.
No London gentleman asks questions. Lord !
If you went "What's-your-job ?"-ing down our way
You'd soon be smelling some one's fist, I reckon,
Or tripping over somebody in the dark
Upon the stairs, and with a broken neck
Be left, still asking questions in your coffin
Till the worms had satisfied you. Not that I
Have anything to hide myself. I'm only
Advising you for your own good. But, old chap,
We were talking of something else . . . that hell-hot road,
I'd pegged along it through the blazing dust
From Bellingham till I could peg no further :
My mouth was just a limekiln, and each foot
One bleeding blister. A kipper on the grid,

That's what I was on the road : and the heather looked
 So cool and cosy, I left the road for a bit
 And, coming on a patch of wet green moss,
 I took my boots off, and it was so champion
 To feel cold water squelching between my toes,
 I paddled like a child till I came to a clump
 Of heather in full bloom, just reeking honey,
 And curled up in it and dropt fast asleep ;
 And when I wakened it was dark, pitch dark,
 For all your stars. The sky was light enough,
 Had I been travelling that way : but the road,
 I hadn't a notion of its whereabouts—
 A blessed babe-in-the-woods I was, clean lost,
 And fit to cry for my mammy. Babes-in-the-wood !
 But there were two of them for company,
 And only one of me by my lone self.
 However, I said to myself—*You've got to spend*
A night in the heather. Well, you've known worse beds,
And worse bed-fellows than a sheep or so—
 Trying to make believe I wasn't frightened.
 And then somehow I couldn't, God knows why !
 But I was scared—the loneliness and all,
 The quietness and the queer creepy noises,
 And something that I couldn't put a name to,
 A kind of feeling in my marrow-bones
 As though the great black hills against the sky
 Had come alive about me in the night,
 And they were watching me, as though I stood
 Naked in a big room with blind men sitting
 Unseen all round me in the quiet darkness
 That wasn't dark to them. And all the stars
 Were eyeing me, and whisperings in the heather
 Were like cold water trickling down my spine ;
 And when I heard a cough . . .

DICK.

A coughing sheep.

TRAMP. Maybe—but 'twas a coughing ghost to me.

I've never yet set eyes on a ghost, unless . . . (*looking askance at*

DICK)

Though I've often felt them near me. Once when I . . .

But, Lord, I'm talking, talking . . .

DICK.

I've seen ghosts

A hundred times. The ghosts of reivers ride

The fells at night, and you'd have ghosts in plenty,
 Forby the Brags and Horneys and Wirracows,
 About you, lad, though you were blind to them.
 But why do you fear them? There's no harm in ghosts :
 Even should they ride over you, it's only
 Like a cold wind blowing through you. The other night
 As I came down by Girsonsfield the ghost
 Of Parcy Reed, with neither hands nor feet,
 Rode clean through me, the false Halls and the Croziers
 Hard on his heels, though I kept clear of them :
 And often I've heard him cracking his hunting-crop
 On a winter's night when the winds were in full cry,
 And heard the yelp of the pack and the horn's halloo
 Over the howl of the storm, or caught at dawn
 A glimpse of the tails of his green hunting-jacket.
 Whenever you shudder or break in a cold sweat,
 Not knowing why, folk say that some one's stepping
 Over your grave, but that's all stuff and nonsense :
 It's only some poor ghost that's walking through you.

TRAMP. Well, ghosts or sheep, I'd had my fill of them—
 Went all to pieces, took to my heels and ran,
 And hadn't run three yards when I pitched headlong.
 That was the first. Since then I've felt the bottom
 Of every hole, five hundred to my reckoning,
 From there to here.

DICK. You've covered some rough ground.
 But you have doubled back upon your tracks
 If you were making north.

TRAMP. Yes, I was making
 For Scotland. I'd a notion . . .

DICK. Scotland lies
 Under your left heel, though your right's in England.

TRAMP. To think of that! Well, I can't feel much difference
 'Twixt one and the other. Perhaps if I'd my boots off . . .
 But, Hamlet's father, isn't it a king's bed
 We're lying on, and sprawling over two countries!
 And yet I'd rather be in Millicent Place,
 London, S.E., and sleeping three in a bed.
 This room's too big for me, too wide and windy;
 The bed too broad and not what I call snug;
 The ceiling far too high and full of eyes.
 I hate the loneliness: I like to feel

There are houses packed with people all about me
 For miles and miles : I'm fond of company ;
 I'm only really happy in a throng,
 Crowds jostling hot and thick about me. Here
 I feel somehow as if I were walking naked
 Among the hills, the last man left alive.
 I haven't so much as set eyes on a house,
 Not since I left that blistering road.

DICK.

The nearest

Is three miles off or more.

TRAMP.

Well, country people

Should be good neighbours and quiet ; but for me
 I'd rather be packed like herrings in a barrel :
 I hate the loneliness ; it makes me think . . .
 I'm fond of company, too fond at times.
 If I hadn't been so fond of company
 A while back, I'd have hardly been lying now
 On Bloodybush Edge talking of ghosts at midnight,
 When I might be . . . but it won't bear thinking on.
 Yet even with you beside me Bloodybush Edge
 Is a size too big in beds—leaves too much room
 For ghosts to suit my fancy : three in a bed,
 And you sleep sound.

DICK.

And why should you fear ghosts

When one fine night you'll be a ghost yourself ?
 How soon, who knows ! Why, even at this moment
 If you had broken your neck among the moss-hags,
 You'd be your own ghost sitting there, not you.
 If you hadn't been so muddy and so frightened . . .
 Nay ! but I've seen too many ghosts in my time
 For you to take me in. Ghosts often lean
 Over me when I'm fishing in the moonlight :
 They're keen, are ghosts : I sometimes feel their breath
 Upon my neck when I am guddling trout,
 Or the clutch of their clammy fingers on my wrist,
 Spearing the salmon, anxious lest I miss :
 And always at the burning of the water
 You'll see them lurking in the shadows beyond
 The flare and the smoke of the torches in the night,
 Eager as boys to join in the sport ; and at times
 When they have pressed too near and a torch has flared,
 I've seen the live flame running through their bodies.

But oftenest they appear to me when alone
I'm fishing like a heron, and last night
As I stooped over Deadwater I felt . . .

TRAMP. And you're an honest man to be asking questions
Of gentlemen on tour! So you're a poacher,
A common poacher—though it must be rare sport
I've often fancied . . .

DICK. To creep up to a pool
Where a big bull-trout lies beneath a boulder
With nose against the stream, his tail scarce flicking,
To creep up quiet and without a shadow
And lie upon your belly in the gravel,
And slide your hands as noiseless as an otter
Into the water, icy-cold and aching,
And tickle, tickle till you have him fuddled;
Then lift him, cold and slithery, from the burn,
A quivering bit of silver in the moonlight. . . .

TRAMP. Ay, it must be rare sport: but, for myself,
I'd rather manage without the help of ghosts.
Once, I remember, I was bending down—
'Twas in an empty house . . . I'd cut my thumb,
The window jamming somehow—a nasty cut:
The mark's still there . . . (not that—nay, that's the place
I was bitten by a friend!) and as I fumbled
With a damned tricky lock, some Yankee patent,
I felt a ghost was standing close behind me,
And dared not stir nor squint over my shoulder,
But crouched there, moving neither hand nor foot,
Till I was just a solid ache of terror,
And could have squealed aloud with the numb cramp
And pins and needles in my arms and legs.
And then at last, when I was almost dropping,
I lost my head, took to my heels and bolted
Head-first downstairs and through the broken window,
Leaving my kit and the swag without a thought,
And never coming to my senses till
I saw a bull's-eye glimmering down the lane.
And then I found my brow was bleeding too—
At first I thought 'twas sweat—a three-inch cut
Clean to the bone. I had to have it stitched.
I told the doctor that I'd put my head
Through a window in the dark, but not a word

TRAMP. You call those women—gawky raw-boned creatures,
Thin-lipped, hard-jawed, cold-eyed! I like fat women.
If you could walk just now down the Old Kent Road
And see the plump young girls in furs and feathers,
With saucy black eyes sparkling in the gaslight,
And looking at you, munching oranges,
Or whispering to each other with shrill giggles

By a hundred miles or so, but when I'm in it
 There always comes a time when I couldn't stay—
 A moment longer, not for love or money,
 Though in the end it always has me back.
 I cannot rest : there's something in my bones—
 They'll need to screw the lid down with brass screws
 To keep them in my coffin. When I'm dead,
 If I don't walk I'll be surprised, I . . . Lord,
 We're on to ghosts again ! But I'm the sort
 That's always hankering to be elsewhere
 Wherever I am. Some men can stick to a job
 As though they liked it. I'm not made that way :
 I couldn't heave the same pick two days running ;
 I've tried it and I know. I must have change :
 It's in my blood. And work, why, work's for fools.

DICK. Ay, fools indeed—and yet they seem content.
 Content !—why, my old uncle, Richard Dodd,
 He worked till he was naught but skin and bone
 And rheumatism, and when the doctor told him :
You must give up. It's no use ; you're past work.—
Past work ! he says, *past work like an old horse ?*
They shoot old nags when they are past their work.
 Doctor, he says, *I'll give you five pounds down*
To take that gun and shoot me like a nag.
 The doctor only laughed and answered, *Nay,*
An old nag's carcase is worth money, Richard :
But yours, why, who'd give anything for yours ?
 They call me daft—Daft Dick : it pleases them :
 But I have never been daft enough to work :
 I never did a hand's-turn in my life,
 And won't while there are trout-streams left and women.
 And I'm a traveller too : I cannot rest :
 The wind's in my bones, I think, and like the wind
 I'm here to-night—to-morrow, Lord knows where !

TRAMP. London, perhaps, or well upon the road there,
 Since I'm at Bloodybush Edge.

DICK. Nay, never London.
 I cannot thole the towns : they stifle me.
 I spent a black day in Newcastle once—
 Never again ! I cannot abide the crowds :
 I must be by myself : I must have air :
 I must have room to breathe and elbow-room,

Wide spaces round me, winds and running water.
 I know the singing-note of every burn
 'Twixt here and High Cup Nick by Appleby.
 And birds and beasts, I must have them about me—
 Rabbits and hares, weasels and stoats and adders,
 Plover and grouse, partridge and snipe and curlew,
 Red-shank and heron. I think that towns would choke me ;
 And I'd go blind, shut in by the tall houses
 With never a far sight to stretch my eyes.
 I must have hills and hills beyond. And beds—
 I've never held with beds and stuffiness :
 I'm seldom at my ease beneath a roof—
 The rafters all seem crushing on my head,
 A dead-weight. Though I sleep in barns in winter,
 I'm never at home except beneath the stars.
 I've seen enough of towns—and as for the women,
 Fat blowsy sluts and slatterns . . .

TRAMP.

Easy, Old Cock !

What's one man's meat . . . as the saying is, and so
 Each man to his own world and his own women.

*(They sit smoking in silence for a while : then DAFT DICK
 begins singing softly to himself again.)*

DICK (*singing*).

*Their horses were the wrong way shod,
 And Hobbie had mounted his grey sae fine,
 Wat on his old horse, Jock on his bay ;
 And on they rode to the waters of Tyne.*

*And when they came to Chollerton Ford
 They lighted down by the light o' the moon,
 And a tree they cut with nogs on each side,
 To climb the wa' o' Newcastle town.*

TRAMP. What's that you're singing, matey ?

DICK.

Jock o' the Side,

A ballad of the day when men were men
 And sheep were sheep, and not all mixter-maxter.
 Thon were brave days, or brave nights rather, thon !
 Brave nights when Liddisdale was Liddisdale,
 And Tynedale Tynedale, not all hand-in-glove
 And hanky-panky and naught but market-haggling
 'Twixt men whose fathers' swords were the bargainers.
 That was a man's work, riding out hot-trod

Over the hills to lift a herd of cattle
 And leave behind a blazing byre, or to steal
 Your neighbour's sheep while he lay drunk and snoring—
 A man's work ever bringing a man's wages,
 The fight to the death, or life won at the sword's point.
 God ! those were nights—the heather and sky alow
 With the light of burning peel-towers and the wind
 Ringing with slogans, as the dalesmen met,
 Over the singing of the swords—

An Armstrong ! An Armstrong !

A Milburne ! A Milburne !

An Elliot ! An Elliot !

A Robson ! A Robson !

A Charlton ! A Charlton !

A Fenwick ! A Fenwick !

Fy, Tynedale, to it !

Jethert's here ! Jethert's here !

Tarset and Tarretburn !

Hardy and heatherbred !

Yet ! Yet !

Man, did you ever hear the story told
 Of Barty Milburne, Barty of the Comb,
 Down Tarset way ?—and how he waked one morning
 To find that overnight some Scottish reiver
 Had lifted the pick of his flock, and how hot-foot
 He was up the Blackburn, summoning Corbet Jock ;
 And how the two set out to track the thieves
 By Emblehope, Berry Moor Edge, and Blackman's Law,
 By Blakehope Nick and under Oh Me Edge
 And over Girdle Fell to Chattlehope Spout,
 And so to Carter Bar, but lost the trail
 Somewhere about the Reidswire ; and how, being loth
 To go home empty-handed, they just lifted
 The best sheep grazing on the Scottish side
 As fair exchange, and turned their faces home.
 Snow had set in by this and 'twas sore work
 Driving the wethers against it over the fells,
 When, finding they were followed in their turn
 By the laird of Leatham and his son, they laughed
 And waited for the Scots at Chattlehope Spout
 Above Catcleugh ; and in the snow they fought
 Till Corbet Jock and one of the Scots was killed

And Barty himself sore-wounded in the thigh ;
 When the other Scot, thinking him good as dead,
 Sprang on him as he stooped, with a whickering laugh :
 But Barty with one clean back-handed blow
 Struck off his head and, as they tell the tale,
Garred it spang like an onion along the heather.
 Then, picking up the body of Corbet Jock,
 He slung it over his shoulder and carried his mate,
 With wounded thigh, and driving the wethers before him,
 Through blinding snow across the boggy fells
 To the Blackburn, though his boot was filled with blood.
 Or the other tale, how one of the Robson lads
 Stole a Scot's ewes, and when he'd got them home
 And had mixed them with his own, found out too late
 They'd got the scab ; and how he went straight back
 With a stout hempen rope to the Scot's house,
 And hanged him from his own roof-tree by the neck
 Till he was dead, to teach the rascal a lesson,
 Or so he said, that when a gentleman called
 For sheep the next time he'd think twice about it
 Before he tried to palm off scabbit ewes.
 Poachers and housebreakers and bargainers !
 Those men were men and lived and died like men,
 Taking their own road, asking no man's leave,
 Doing and speaking outright, hot and clean,
 The thing that burned in them, and paying the price.
 And those same gawky raw-boned women mothered
 Such sons as these : and still do nowadays—
 For hunting foxes and for market-haggling !
 You fear no living man ! A glinting bull's-eye
 Down a dark lane would not have set them scuttling.
 They didn't fear the moss-hags in the dark ;
 And seemingly they'd little fear of ghosts,
 Being themselves so free in making ghosts.
 Ghosts ! why, the night is all alive with ghosts,
 Ghosts of dead raiders and dead cattle-lifters,
 Poor headless ghosts and ghosts with broken necks. . . .
 See that chap yonder with the bleeding thigh
 On a grey gelding making for Hurklewinter—
 A horse-thief sure. . . . And ghostly stallions whinny
 As ghostly reivers drive their flocks and herds. . . .
 (*Listening*) They are quiet now, but I've often heard the patter

Of sheep or the trot-trot of the frightened stirks
Down this same road.

TRAMP. Stop, man! You'll drive me crazy!
Let's talk no more of ghosts! I want to sleep:
I'm dog-tired . . . but I'll never sleep to-night.
What's that? I thought I heard . . . I'm all atremble.
My very blood stops, listening, in my veins.
I'm all to fiddlestrings. . . . Let's talk of London
And lights and crowds and women. Once I met
A chap in the bar of The World Turned Upside Down
With three blue snakes tattooed around his wrist—
A joker, he was, and what he didn't know
Of women the world over you could shove
Betwixt the nail and the quick and never feel it.
He told me that in Valparaiso once
A half-breed wench that he . . . But, Lord, what's that!

(A low distant sound of trotting drawing quickly nearer.)

I thought I heard . . . Do you hear nothing?

DICK.

Naught.

TRAMP. I'm all on edge: I could have sworn I heard—
Where was I? Well, as I was saying . . . God!
Can you hear nothing now? Trot-trot! trot-trot!
I must be going crazy, or you're stone-deaf.

DICK. Nay, I'm none deaf.

TRAMP. It's coming nearer, nearer . . .
Trot-trot! trot-trot! Man, tell me that you hear it,
For God's sake, or I'll go mad!

DICK. No two men ever

May hear or see them together at one time.

TRAMP. Hear what? See what? Speak, man, if you've a
tongue!

DICK. The ghostly stirks.

TRAMP. The ghostly stirks! Trot-trot!
Trot-trot! They're almost on us. Look you! there!
Along the road there, black against the sky . . .
They're charging down with eyes ablaze . . . O Christ!

*(He leaps up and takes to his heels, running down the road on
the Scottish side as a herd of frightened young stirks
gallops down the road from the English side. They pass
DICK, who watches them, placidly smoking, until they are
by, when, taking his pipe from his mouth, he gives a blood-
curdling whoop which sends them scampering more madly*

after the tramp. Presently the cattle-drover, panting and limping half-a-mile behind his herd, comes down the road. Seeing DICK, he stops.)

DROVER. Have any beasts come by? Lord, what a dance They've led me since we quitted Bellingham! I've chased them over half the countryside.

DICK. Ay, they were making straight for Dinlabyre.

DROVER. Then I can rest: they cannot go far wrong now.

We're for Saughtree; and I'm fair hattered, and they Can't have the spunk left in them to stray far. They'll be all right.

DICK. Ay, and your brother's with them.

DROVER. Brother? I have no brother!

DICK. Well, he and you Are as like as peas—a pair of gallows-birds; And he was driving them and walloping them . . .

DROVER (*starting to run*). Good God! Just wait till I catch up with him!

DICK (*calling after him*). It will take you all your time and more to catch him!

(*To himself*) Now I can sleep in peace without bedfellows. Two in a bed is one too many for me— And such a clatter-jaw!

1913.

HOOPS

SCENE.—*The big tent-stable of a travelling circus. On the ground near the entrance GENTLEMAN JOHN, stable-man and odd-job man, lies smoking beside MERRY ANDREW, the clown. GENTLEMAN JOHN is a little hunched man with a sensitive face and dreamy eyes. He is an educated and travelled man who has drifted through many vicissitudes into his present job. MERRY ANDREW, who is resting between the afternoon and evening performances with his clown's hat lying beside him, wears a crimson wig and a baggy suit of orange-coloured cotton, patterned with purple cats. His face is chalked dead-white and painted with a set grin, so that it is impossible to*

see what manner of man he is. In the background are camels and elephants feeding, dimly visible in the steamy dusk of the tent.

GENTLEMAN JOHN. And then consider camels—only think
Of camels long enough and you'd go mad—
With all their humps and lumps, their nobbly knees,
Splay feet and straddle legs, their sagging necks,
Flat flanks and scraggy tails and monstrous teeth.
I've not forgotten the first fiend I met—
'Twas in a lane in Smyrna, just a ditch
Between the shuttered houses, and so narrow
The brute's bulk blocked the road ; the huge green stack
Of dewy fodder that it slouched beneath
Brushing the yellow walls on either hand
And shutting out the strip of burning blue :
And I'd to face that vicious bobbing head
With evil eyes, slack lips, and nightmare teeth,
And duck beneath the snaky squirming neck,
Pranked with its silly string of sky-blue beads,
That seemed to wriggle every way at once,
As though it were a hydra. Allah's beard !
But I was scared and nearly turned and ran :
I felt that muzzle take me by the scruff,
And heard those murderous teeth crunching my spine
Before I stooped—though I dodged safely under.
I've always been afraid of ugliness :
I'm such a toad myself, I hate all toads ;
And the camel is the ugliest toad of all
To my mind ; and it's just my devil's luck
I've come to this—to be a camel's lackey,
To fetch and carry for original sin ;
For sure enough the camel's old evil incarnate.
Blue beads and amulets to ward off evil !
No eye's more evil than the camel's eye.
The elephant is quite a comely brute
Compared with Satan camel—trunk and all,
His floppy ears and his impertinent tail.
He's stolid, but at least a gentleman.
It doesn't hurt my pride to valet him
And bring his shaving-water. He's a lord.
Only the bluest blood that has come down

Through generations from the mastodon
Could carry off that tail with dignity,
That tail and trunk. He cannot look absurd,
For all the monkey tricks you put him through,
Your paper hoops and pop-guns. He just makes
His masters look ridiculous when his pomp's
Butchered to make a bumpkin's holiday.
He's dignity itself and proper pride
That stands serenely in a circus-world
Of mountebanks and monkeys. He has weight
Behind him, æons of primeval power
Have shaped that pillared bulk, and he stands sure,
Solid, substantial on the world's foundations.
And he has form—form that's too big a thing
To be called beauty. Once, long since, I thought
To be a poet and shape words and mould
A poem like an elephant, huge, sublime,
To front oblivion ; and because I failed,
And all my rhymes were gawky shambling camels
Or else obscene blue-buttocked apes, I'm doomed
To fetch and carry for the things I've made,
Till one of them crunches my backbone with his teeth,
Or knocks my wind out with a forthright kick
Clean in the midriff, crumpling up in death
The hunched and stunted body that was me—
John, the apostle of the Perfect Form !
Jerusalem ! I'm talking like a book,
As you would say, and a bad book at that,
A maundering kiss-mammy book—The Hunchback's End
Or The Camel-Keeper's Reward would be the title.
I froth and bubble like a new-broached cask.
No wonder you look glum, for all your grin.
What makes you mope ? You've naught to growse about :
You've got no hump : your body's clean and straight—
So shapely even that you can afford
To trick it in fantastic shapelessness,
Knowing that there's a clean-limbed man beneath
Preposterous pantaloons and purple cats.
I would have been a poet if I could ;
But better than shaping poems 'twould have been
To have had a comely body and clean limbs
Obedient to my bidding.

MERRY ANDREW. I missed a hoop
This afternoon.

GENTLEMAN JOHN. You missed a hoop? You mean . . .

MERRY ANDREW. That I am done, used up, scrapped, on the
shelf,

Out of the running—only that, no more.

GENTLEMAN JOHN. Well, I've been missing hoops my whole
life long ;

Though when I come to think of it, perhaps
There's little consolation to be chewed
From crumbs that I can offer.

MERRY ANDREW. I've not missed
A hoop since I was six. I'm forty-two.
This is the first time that my body's failed me,
But 'twill not be the last : and . . .

GENTLEMAN JOHN. Such is life !—
You're going to say. You see I've got it pat,
Your jaded wheeze. Lord, what a wit I'd make
If I'd a set grin painted on my face !
And such is life, I'd say a hundred times,
And each time set the world aroar afresh
At my original humour. Missed a hoop !
Why, man alive, you've naught to grumble at.
I've boggled every hoop since I was six.
I'm fifty-five ; and I've run round a ring
Would make your potty circus seem a pinhole.
I wasn't born to sawdust : I'd the world
For circus. . . .

MERRY ANDREW. It's no time for crowing now.
I know a gentleman, and take on trust
The silver spoon and all. My teeth were cut
Upon a horseshoe, and I wasn't born
To purple and fine linen—but to sawdust,
To sawdust, as you say—brought up on sawdust :
I've had to make my daily bread of sawdust,
Ay, and my children's—children's, that's the rub,
As Shakespeare says.

GENTLEMAN JOHN. Ah, there you go again !
What a rare wit to set the ring aroar—
As Shakespeare says ! Crowing ? A gentleman ?
Man, didn't you say you'd never missed a hoop ?
It's only gentlemen who miss no hoops,

The misstitched, gnarled, and crooked thing I am.
 Now, do you understand ? I may have words ;
 But you, man, do you never burn with pride
 That you've begotten those six limber bodies,
 Firm flesh, and supple sinew and lithe limb—
 Six nimble lads, each like young Absalom,
 With red blood running lively in his veins,
 Bone of your bone, your very flesh and blood ?
 It's you don't understand. God, what I'd give
 This moment to be you just as you are,
 Preposterous pantaloons and purple cats
 And painted leer and crimson curls and all,
 To be you now, with only one missed hoop,
 If I'd six clean-limbed children of my loins,
 Born of the ecstasy of life within me,
 To keep it quick and valiant in the ring
 When I . . . but I . . . Man, man, you've missed a hoop :
 But they'll take every hoop like blooded colts ;
 And 'twill be you in them that leaps through life,
 And in their children and their children's children.
 God ! doesn't it make you hold your breath to feel
 There'll always be an Andrew in the ring,
 The very spit and image of you stripped,
 While life's old circus lasts ? And I . . . at least
 There is no twisted thing of my begetting
 To keep my shame alive : and that's the most
 That I've to pride myself upon—but, God,
 I'm proud, ay, proud as Lucifer, of that.
 Think what it means with all the urge and sting
 When such a lust of life runs in the veins :
 You, with your six sons and your one missed hoop,
 Put that thought in your pipe and smoke it. Well,
 And how do you like the flavour ? Something bitter,
 And burns the tongue a trifle ? That's the brand
 That I must smoke while I've the breath to puff.

(Pause.)

I've always worshipped the body, all my life—
 The body quick with the perfect health that is beauty,
 Lively, lissom, alert, and taking its way
 Through the world with the easy gait of the early gods.
 The only moments I've lived my life to the full
 And that live again in remembrance unfaded are those

When I've seen life compact in some perfect body,
 The living God made manifest in man—
 A diver in the Mediterranean, resting
 With sleeked black hair and glistening salt-tanned skin,
 Gripping the quivering gunwale with tense hands,
 His torso lifted out of the peacock sea
 Like Neptune carved in amber come to life :
 A stark Egyptian on the Nile's edge poised
 Like a bronze Osiris against the lush rank green :
 A fisherman dancing reels on New Year's Eve,
 In a hall of shadowy rafters and flickering lights
 At St. Abb's on the Berwickshire coast, to the skirl of the
 pipes,
 The lift of the wave in his heels, the sea in his veins :
 A Cherokee Indian, as though he were one with his horse,
 His coppery shoulders agleam, his feathers aflame
 With the last of the sun, descending a gulch in Nebraska :
 A brawny Cleveland puddler, stripped to the loins
 On a cauldron's brink, stirring the molten iron
 In the white-hot glow, a man of white-hot metal :
 A Cornish ploughboy driving an easy share
 Through the grey light soil of a headland against a sea
 Of sapphire, gay in his new white corduroys,
 Blue-eyed, dark-haired, and whistling a careless tune :
 Jack Johnson stripped for the ring in his swarthy pride
 Of sleek and rippling muscle . . .

MERRY ANDREW.

Jack's the boy !

Ay, he's the proper figure of a man :
 But he'll grow fat and flabby and scant of breath :
 He'll miss his hoop, poor nigger : a boxer's day
 Is short and sweet as a . . .

GENTLEMAN JOHN.

But what are words

To shape the joy of form ? The Greeks did best
 To cut in marble or to cast in bronze
 Their ecstasy of living. I remember
 A marvellous Hermes that I saw in Athens,
 Fished from the very bottom of the deep
 Where he had lain two thousand years or more,
 Wrecked with a galley-full of Roman pirates,
 Among the white bones of his plunderers
 Whose flesh had fed the fishes as they sank—
 Serene in cold, imperishable beauty,

Biding his time till he should rise again
Exultant from the wave for all men's worship,
The morning spring of life, the youth of the world,
Shaped in sea-coloured bronze for everlasting.
Ay, the Greeks knew ; but men have forgotten now :
Not easily do we meet beauty walking
The world to-day in all the body's pride.
That's why I'm here—a stable-boy to camels—
For in the circus-ring there's more delight
Of seemly bodies, goodly in sheer health,
Bodies trained and tuned to the perfect pitch,
Eager, blithe, debonair, from head to heel
Aglow and alive in every pulse, than elsewhere
In this machine-ridden land of grimy, glum,
Round-shouldered, coughing mechanics. Once I lived
In London in a slum called Paradise,
Sickened to see the greasy pavement crawling
With puny flabby babies thick as maggots.
Poor brats ! I'd soon go mad if I'd to live
In London with its stunted men and women
But little better to look on than myself.
Yet there's an island where the men keep fit—
St. Kilda's, a stark fastness of high crag :
They must keep fit or famish—their main food
The solan goose ; and it's a chancy job
To climb down a sheer face of slippery granite
And drop a noose over the sentinel bird
Before he can squawk to rouse the sleeping flock.
They must keep fit—their bodies taut and trim,
To have the nerve ; and they're like tempered steel,
Suppled and fined. But even they've grown slacker
Through traffic with the mainland in these days.
A hundred years ago the custom held
That none should take a wife till he had stood,
His left heel on the dizziest point of crag,
His right leg and both arms stretched in mid-air
Above the sea—three hundred feet to drop
To death if he should fail, a Spartan test.
But any man who could have failed would scarce
Have earned his livelihood or his children's bread
On that bleak rock.

MERRY ANDREW (*drowsily*). Ay, children—that's it, children !

GENTLEMAN JOHN. St. Kilda's children had a chance, at least,
 With none begotten idly of weakling fathers.
 A Spartan test for fatherhood ! Should they miss
 Their hoop 'twas death, and childless. You have still
 Six lives to take unending hoops for you,
 And you yourself are not done yet. . . .

MERRY ANDREW (*more drowsily*). Not yet :
 And there's much comfort in the thought of children.
 They're bonnie boys enough, and should do well
 If I can but keep going a little while,
 A little longer till . . .

GENTLEMAN JOHN. Six strapping sons !
 And I have naught but camels—and my dreams,
 Dreams, sterile dreams. . . . Yet even I have seen
 A vision in this stable that puts to shame
 Each ecstasy of mortal flesh and blood
 That's been my eyes' delight. I never breathed
 A word of it to man or woman yet—
 I couldn't whisper it now to you if you looked
 Like any mortal thing this side of death.
 'Twas on the night I stumbled on the circus :
 I'd wandered all day, lost among the fells,
 Over snow-smothered hills, through blinding blizzard,
 Whipped by a wind that seemed to strip and skin me,
 Till I was one numb ache of sodden ice.
 Quite done and drunk with cold, I'd soon have dropped
 Dead in a ditch—when suddenly a lanthorn
 Dazzled my eyes : I smelt a queer warm smell
 And felt a hot puff in my face, and blundered
 Out of the flurry of snow and raking wind
 Dizzily into a glowing Arabian night
 Of elephants and camels having supper.
 I thought that I'd gone mad—stark staring mad ;
 But I was much too sleepy to mind just then—
 Dropped dead-asleep upon a truss of hay
 And lay, a log, till—well I cannot tell
 How long I lay unconscious. I only know
 I slept and wakened—and that 'twas no dream.
 I heard a rustle in the hay beside me,
 And, opening sleepy eyes, scarce marvelling
 I saw her, standing naked in the lamplight
 Beneath the huge tent's cavernous canopy,

Against the throng of elephants and camels
 That champed unwondering in the golden dusk,
 Moon-white Diana, mettled Artemis—
 Her body quick and tense as her own bowstring,
 Her spirit an arrow barbed and strung for flight—
 White snowflakes melting on her night-black hair
 And on her glistening breasts and supple thighs,
 Her red lips parted, her keen eyes alive
 With fierce far-ranging hungers of the chase
 Over the hills of morn. . . .

The lanthorn guttered ;

And I was left alone in the outer darkness
 Among the champing elephants and camels.
 And I'll be a camel-keeper to the end,
 Though never again my eyes . . .

(*Pause.*)

So you can sleep,

You Merry Andrew, for all you missed your hoop.
 It's just as well perhaps : now I can hold
 My secret to the end. Ah, here they come !

*(Six lads between the ages of three and twelve, clad in pink
 tights covered with silver spangles, tumble into the tent.)*

THE ELDEST BOY. Daddy, the bell's rung, and . . .

GENTLEMAN JOHN.

He's snoozing sound.

(*To the youngest boy*) You just creep quietly and take tight hold
 Of the crimson curls and tug, and you will hear
 The purple pussies all caterwaul at once.

BATTLE
(1916)

BEFORE ACTION

I SIT beside the brazier's glow
And, drowsing in the heat,
I dream of daffodils that blow
And lambs that frisk and bleat—

Black lambs that frolic in the snow
Among the daffodils
In a far orchard that I know
Beneath the Malvern Hills.

Next year the daffodils will blow
And lambs will frisk and bleat,
But I'll not feel the brazier's glow,
Nor any cold or heat.

BREAKFAST

WE ate our breakfast lying on our backs
Because the shells were screeching overhead.
I bet a rasher to a loaf of bread
That Hull United would beat Halifax
When Jimmy Stainthorpe played full-back instead
Of Billy Bradford. Ginger raised his head
And cursed, and took the bet, and dropt back dead.
We ate our breakfast lying on our backs
Because the shells were screeching overhead.

THE BAYONET

THIS bloody steel
Has killed a man.
I heard him squeal
As on I ran.

He watched me come
 With wagging head.
 I pressed it home,
 And he was dead.

Though clean and clear
 I've wiped the steel,
 I still can hear
 That dying squeal.

THE QUESTION

I WONDER if the old cow died or not ?
 Gey bad she was the night I left, and sick.
 Dick reckoned she would mend. He knows a lot—
 At least he fancies so himself, does Dick.

Dick knows a lot : but happen I did wrong
 To leave the cow to him and come away.
 Over and over like a silly song
 These words keep bumming in my head all day—

And all I think of as I face the foe
 And take my lucky chance of being shot
 Is this—that, if I'm hit, I'll never know
 Till Doomsday if the old cow died or not.

THE RETURN

HE went, and he was gay to go ;
 And I smiled on him as he went—
 My boy ! 'Twas well he didn't know
 My darkest dread, or what it meant—

Just what it meant to smile and smile
 And let my son go cheerily—
 My son . . . and wondering all the while
 What stranger would come back to me.

SALVAGE

So suddenly her life
Had crashed about that grey old country wife,
Naked she stood and gazed
Bewildered while her home about her blazed.
New-widowed and bereft
Of her five sons, she clung to what was left,
Still hugging all she'd got—
A toy gun and a copper coffee-pot.

DEAF

THIS day last year I heard the curlew calling
By Halypike,
And the clear tinkle of hill-waters falling
Down slack and syke.

But now I cannot hear the shrapnel's screaming,
The screech of shells ;
And if again I see the blue lough gleaming
Among the fells,

Unheard of me will be the curlew's calling
By Halypike,
And the clear tinkle of hill-waters falling
Down slack and syke.

MAD

NECK-DEEP in mud,
He mowed and raved—
He who had braved
The field of blood—
And as a lad
Just out of school
Yelled—*April fool!*
And laughed like mad.

RAINING

THE night I left my father said—
*You'll go and do some stupid thing :
You've no more sense in that fat head
Than Silly Billy Witterling.*

*Not sense to come in when it rains—
Not sense enough for that you've got.
You'll get a bullet through your brains
Before you know, as like as not.*

And now I'm lying in the trench,
And shells and bullets through the night
Are raining in a steady drench—
I'm thinking the old man was right.

THE FEAR

I DO not fear to die
'Neath the open sky,
To meet death in the fight
Face to face upright.

But when at last we creep
Into a hole to sleep,
I tremble, cold with dread
Lest I wake up dead.

IN THE AMBULANCE

*Two rows of cabbages,
Two of curly-greens,
Two rows of early peas,
Two of kidney-beans.*

That's what he keeps muttering,
Making such a song,
Keeping other chaps awake
The whole night long.

Both his legs are shot away,
And his head is light,
So he keeps on muttering
All the blessed night :

*Two rows of cabbages,
Two of curly-greens,
Two rows of early peas,
Two of kidney-beans.*

HILL-BORN

I SOMETIMES wonder if it's really true
I ever knew
Another life
Than this unending strife
With unseen enemies in lowland mud,
And wonder if my blood
Thrilled ever to the tune
Of clean winds blowing through an April noon
Mile after sunny mile
On the green ridges of the Windy Gile.

THE FATHER

THAT was his sort :
It didn't matter
What we were at
But he must chatter
Of this and that
His little son
Had said or done ;

BATTLE

Till, as he told
The fiftieth time
Without a change
How three-year-old
Prattled a rhyme,
They got the range
And cut him short.

THE REEK

TO-NIGHT they're sitting by the peat
Talking of me I know—
Grandfather in the ingle-seat,
Mother and Meg and Joe.

I feel a sudden puff of heat
That sets my ears aglow,
And smell the reek of burning peat
Across the Belgian snow.

NIGHTMARE

THEY gave him a shilling,
They gave him a gun,
And so he's gone killing
The Germans, my son.

I dream of that shilling—
I dream of that gun—
And it's they that are killing
The boy who's my son.

COMRADES

As I was marching in Flanders
A ghost kept step with me—
Kept step with me and chuckled
And muttered ceaselessly—

*Once I too marched in Flanders,
The very spit of you,
And just a hundred years since,
To fall at Waterloo.*

*They buried me in Flanders
Upon the field of blood,
And long I've lain forgotten
Deep in the Flemish mud.*

*But now you march in Flanders,
The very spit of me,
To the ending of the day's march
I'll bear you company.*

THE LARK

A LULL in the racket and brattle,
And a lark soars into the light—
And its song seems the voice of the light
Quelling the voices of night
And the shattering fury of battle.

But again the fury of battle
Breaks out, and he drops from the height—
Dead as a stone from the height—
Drops dead, and the voice of the light
Is drowned in the shattering brattle.

THE VOW

DOES he ever remember,
The lad that I knew,
The night in September
He vowed to be true—

Does he hear my heart crying
And fighting for breath
In the land where he's lying
As quiet as death ?

MANGEL-WURZELS

LAST year I was hoeing,
Hoeing mangel-wurzels,
Hoeing mangel-wurzels all day in the sun,
Hoeing for the squire
Down in Gloucestershire,
Willy-nilly till the sweaty job was done.

Now I'm in the 'wurzels,
In the mangel-wurzels,
All day in the 'wurzels 'neath the Belgian sun :
But among this little lot
It's a different job I've got—
For you don't hoe mangel-wurzels with a gun.

HIS FATHER

I QUITE forgot to put the spigot in :
It's just come over me. . . . And it is queer
To think he'll not care if we lose or win,
And yet be jumping-mad about that beer.

I left it running full. He must have said
A thing or two. I'd give my stripes to hear
What he will say if I'm reported dead
Before he gets me told about that beer !

HIT

OUT of the sparkling sea
I drew my tingling body clear and lay
On a low ledge the livelong summer day,
Basking and watching lazily
White sails in Falmouth Bay.

My body seemed to burn
Salt in the sun that drenched it through and through,
Till every particle glowed clean and new
And slowly seemed to turn
To lucent amber in a world of blue . . .

I felt a sudden wrench,
A trickle of warm blood—
And found that I was sprawling in the mud
Among the dead men in the trench.

BACK

THEY ask me where I've been,
And what I've done and seen.
But what can I reply
Who know it wasn't I,
But some one just like me,
Who went across the sea
And with my head and hands
Killed men in foreign lands . . .
Though I must bear the blame,
Because he bore my name.

HIS MATE

*HI-DIDDLE-DIDDLE,
The cat and the fiddle . . .*

I raised my head
And saw him seated on a heap of dead,
Yelling the nursery-tune,
Grimacing at the moon . . .

*And the cow jumped over the moon.
The little dog laughed to see such sport,
And the dish ran away with the spoon.*

And as he stopped to snigger,
I struggled to my knees and pulled the trigger.

THE DANCERS

ALL day beneath the hurtling shells,
Before my burning eyes
Hover the dainty demoiselles—
The peacock dragonflies.

Unceasingly they dart and glance
Above the stagnant stream . . .
And I am fighting here in France
As in a senseless dream—

A dream of shattering black shells
That hurtle overhead,
And dainty dancing demoiselles
Above the dreamless dead.

THE JOKE

HE'D even have his joke
While we were sitting tight,
And so he needs must poke
His silly head in sight
To whisper some new jest,
Chortling, but as he spoke
A rifle cracked . . .
And now God knows when I shall hear the rest.

CHERRIES

A HANDFUL of cherries
She gave me in passing,
The wizened old woman,
And wished me good luck—

And again I was dreaming,
A boy in the sunshine,
And life but an orchard
Of cherries to pluck.

THE HOUSEWIFE

SHE must go back, she said,
Because she'd not had time to make the bed :
We'd hurried her away
So roughly. . . . And, for all that we could say,
She broke from us and passed
Into the night, shells falling thick and fast.

VICTORY

I WATCHED it oozing quietly
Out of the gaping gash.
The lads thrust on to victory
With lunge and curse and crash.

Half-dazed, that uproar seemed to me
Like some old battle-sound
Heard long ago, as quietly
His blood soaked in the ground.

The lads thrust on to victory
With lunge and crash and shout.
I lay and watched, as quietly
His life was running out.

THE MESSAGES

*I CANNOT quite remember. . . . There were five
Dropt dead beside me in the trench—and three
Whispered their dying messages to me . . .*

Back from the trenches, more dead than alive,
Stone-deaf and dazed and with a broken knee
He hobbled slowly, muttering vacantly—

*I cannot quite remember. . . . There were five
Dropt dead beside me in the trench—and three
Whispered their dying messages to me . . .*

*Their friends are waiting, wondering how they thrive—
Waiting a word in silence patiently . . .
But what they said or who their friends may be*

*I cannot quite remember. . . . There were five
Dropt dead beside me in the trench—and three
Whispered their dying messages to me . . .*

THE QUIET

I COULD not understand the sudden quiet—
The sudden darkness, in the crash of fight,
The din and glare of day quenched in a twinkling
In utter starless night.

I lay an age and idly gazed at nothing,
Half-puzzled that I couldn't lift my head ;
And then somehow I knew that I was lying
Among the other dead.

1914-15.

FRIENDS
(1916)

TO THE MEMORY OF
RUPERT BROOKE

HE'S gone.
I do not understand :
I only know
That as he turned to go
And waved his hand
In his young eyes a sudden glory shone,
And I was dazzled by a sunset glow,
And he was gone.

23rd April 1915.

RUPERT BROOKE

I

YOUR face was lifted to the golden sky
Ablaze beyond the black roofs of the square
As flame on flame leapt, flourishing in air
Its tumult of red stars exultantly
To the cold constellations dim and high ;
And, as we neared, the roaring ruddy flare
Kindled to gold your throat and brow and hair
Until you burned, a flame of ecstasy.

The golden head goes down into the night
Quenched in cold gloom—and yet again you stand
Beside me now with lifted face alight
As, flame to flame and fire to fire, you burn . . .
Then, recollecting, laughingly you turn
And look into my eyes and take my hand.

II

Once in my garret—you being far away
Tramping the hills and breathing upland air,
Or so I fancied—brooding in my chair,
I watched the London sunlight feeble and grey
Dapple my desk, too tired to labour more,
When, looking up, I saw you standing there,
Although I'd caught no footstep on the stair,
Like sudden April at my open door.

Though now beyond earth's farthest hills you fare,
Song-crowned, immortal, sometimes it seems to me
That if I listen very quietly
Perhaps I'll hear your footstep on the stair
And see you, standing with your angel air,
Fresh from the uplands of eternity.

III

Your eyes rejoiced in colour's ecstasy,
Fulfilling even their uttermost desire,
When, over a great sunlit field afire
With windy poppies streaming like a sea
Of scarlet flame that flaunted riotously
Among green orchards of that western shire,
You gazed as though your heart could never tire
Of life's red flood in summer revelry.

And as I watched you, little thought had I
How soon beneath the dim, low-drifting sky
Your soul should wander down the darkling way
With eyes that peer a little wistfully,
Half-glad, half-sad, remembering, as they see
Lethean poppies shrivelling ashen grey.

IV

October chestnuts showered their perishing gold
Over us as beside the stream we lay
In the Old Vicarage garden that blue day,
Talking of verse and all the manifold
Delights a little net of words may hold,
While in the sunlight water-voles at play
Dived under a trailing crimson bramble spray,
And walnuts thudded on the soft black mould.

Your soul goes down unto a darker stream
Alone, O friend, yet even in death's deep night
Your eyes may grow accustomed to the dark,
And Styx for you may have the ripple and gleam
Of your familiar river, and Charon's bark
Tarry by that old garden of your delight.

WILLIAM DENIS BROWNE

(GALLIPOLI, 11TH JUNE 1915)

NIGHT after night we two together heard
The music of the Ring,
The inmost silence of our being stirred
By voice and string.

Though I to-night in silence sit, and you
In stranger silence sleep,
Eternal music stirs and thrills anew
The severing deep.

TENANTS

SUDDENLY out of dark and leafy ways
We came upon the little house asleep
In cold blind stillness, shadowless and deep,
In the white magic of the full moon-blaze :
Strangers without the gate we stood agaze,
Fearful to break the quiet and to creep
Into the house that had been ours to keep
Through a long year of happy nights and days.

So unfamiliar in the white moon-gleam,
So old and ghostly like a house of dream
It seemed, that over us there stole the dread
That, even as we watched it side by side,
The ghosts of lovers, who had lived and died
Within its walls, were sleeping in our bed.

SEA-CHANGE

WIND FLICKED and ruddy her young body glowed
In sunny shallows, splashing them to spray ;
But when on rippled silver sand she lay,
And over her the little green waves flowed,

Coldly translucent and moon-coloured showed
Her frail young beauty, as if rapt away
From all the light and laughter of the day
To some twilit, forlorn sea-god's abode.

Again into the sun with happy cry
She leapt alive and sparkling from the sea,
Sprinkling white spray against the hot blue sky,
A laughing girl . . . and yet I see her lie
Under a deeper tide eternally
In cold moon-coloured immortality.

GOLD

ALL day the mallet thudded, far below
My garret, in an old ramshackle shed
Where, ceaselessly, with stiffly nodding head
And rigid motions ever to and fro,
A figure like a puppet in a show
Before the window moved till day was dead,
Beating out gold to earn his daily bread,
Beating out thin fine gold-leaf blow on blow.

And I within my garret all day long
To that unceasing thudding tuned my song,
Beating out golden words in tune and time
To that dull thudding, rhyme on golden rhyme :
But in my dreams all night in that dark shed
With aching arms I beat fine gold for bread.

THE OLD BED

STREAMING beneath the eaves, the sunset light
Turns the white walls and ceilings to pure gold,
And gold the quilt and pillows on the old
Four-poster bed—all day a cold drift-white—
As if in a gold casket glistening bright
The gleam of winter sunshine sought to hold
The sleeping child safe from the dark and cold
And creeping shadows of the coming night.

Slowly it fades, and, stealing through the gloom,
Home-coming shadows throng the quiet room,
Grey ghosts that move unrustling without breath
To their familiar rest, and closelier creep
About the little dreamless child asleep
Upon the bed of bridal, birth, and death.

TREES

(To LASCELLES ABERCROMBIE)

THE flames half lit the cavernous mystery
Of the over-arching elm that loomed profound
And mountainous above us, from the ground
Soaring to midnight stars majestically,
As, under the shelter of that ageless tree
In a rapt dreaming circle we lay around
The crackling faggots, listening to the sound
Of old words moving in new harmony.

And as you read before our wondering eyes
Arose another tree of mighty girth,
Crested with stars though rooted to the earth,
Its heavy-foliaged branches lit with gleams
Of ruddy firelight and the light of dreams,
Soaring immortal to eternal skies.

OBLIVION

NEAR the great pyramid, unshadowed, white,
With apex piercing the white noonday blaze,
Swathed in white robes beneath the blinding rays
Lie sleeping Bedouins drenched in hot white light.
About them, searing to the tingling sight,
Swims the white dazzle of the desert-ways
Where the sense shudders, witless and adaze,
In a white void with neither depth nor height.

Within the black core of the pyramid,
 Beneath the weight of sunless centuries,
 Lapt in dead night King Cheops lies asleep:
 Yet in the darkness of his chamber hid
 He knows no black oblivion more deep
 Than this blind white oblivion of noon skies.

RETREAT

BROKEN, bewildered by the long retreat
 Across the stifling leagues of Southern plain,
 Across the scorching leagues of trampled grain,
 Half-stunned, half-blinded by the trudge of feet
 And dusty smother of the August heat,
 He dreamt of wild flowers in an English lane,
 Of hedgerow flowers aglisten after rain—
 All-heal and willowherb and meadowsweet.

All-heal and willowherb and meadowsweet—
 The innocent names kept up a cool refrain,
 All-heal and willowherb and meadowsweet,
 Chiming and tinkling through his aching brain
 Until he babbled as a child again—
All-heal and willowherb and meadowsweet.

NIGHT

VESUVIUS, purple under purple skies
 Beyond the purple still unrippling sea ;
 Sheer amber lightning streaming ceaselessly
 From heaven to earth, dazzling bewildered eyes
 With all the terror of beauty ; thus day dies
 That dawned in blue unclouded innocence ;
 And thus we look our last on Italy
 That soon obscured by night behind us lies.

And night descends on us, tempestuous night,
 Night torn with terror, as we sail the deep,
 And like a cataract down a mountain-steep
 Pours, loud with thunder, that red perilous fire. . . .
 Yet shall the dawn, O land of our desire,
 Show thee again, re-orient, crowned with light.

THE ORPHANS

AT five o'clock one April morn
 I met them making tracks,
 Young Benjamin and Abel Horn
 With bundles on their backs.

Young Benjamin is seventy-five,
 Young Abel seventy-seven—
 The oldest innocents alive
 Beneath that April heaven.

I asked them why they trudged about
 With crabby looks and sour—
*And does your mother know you're out
 At this unearthly hour?*

They stopped and, scowling up at me,
 Each shook a grizzled head,
 And swore and then spat bitterly,
 As with one voice they said—

*Homeless about the countryside
 We never thought to roam,
 But mother, she has gone and died
 And broken up the home.*

?

MOONING in the moonlight
 I met a mottled pig
 Grubbing mast and acorn
 On the Gallows Rigg.

FRIENDS

*Tell, O tell me truly,
While I wander blind,
Do your peepy pig's eyes
Really see the wind—*

*See the great wind flowing
Darkling and agleam
Through the fields of heaven
In a crystal stream ?*

*Do the singing eddies
Break on bough and twig
Into silvery sparkles
In your eyes, O pig ?*

*Do celestial surges
Sweep across the night
Like a sea of glory
In your blessed sight ?*

*Tell, oh tell me truly !
But the mottled pig,
Grubbing mast and acorns,
Didn't care a fig.*

THE PESSIMIST

HIS body bulged with puppies—little eyes
Peeped out of every pocket black and bright,
And with an innocent round-eyed surprise
He watched the glittering traffic of the night.

*What this world's coming to I cannot tell,
He muttered, as I passed him, with a whine—
Things surely must be making slap for hell,
When no one wants these little dogs of mine.*

THE SWEET-TOOTH

TAKING a turn after tea
Through orchards of Mirabellea,
Where clusters of yellow and red
Dangled and glowed overhead,
Who should I see
But old Timothy,
Hale and hearty as hearty can be—
Timothy under the crab-apple tree.

His blue eyes twinkling at me,
Munching and crunching with glee,
And wagging his wicked old head,
I've still got a sweet-tooth, he said—
A hundred and three
Come January,
I've one tooth left in my head, said he,
Timothy under the crab-apple tree.

GIRL'S SONG

I SAW three black pigs riding
In a blue and yellow cart—
Three black pigs riding to the fair
Behind the old grey dappled mare ;
But it wasn't black pigs riding
In a gay and gaudy cart
That sent me into hiding
With a flutter in my heart.

I heard the cart returning,
The jolting, jingling cart—
Returning empty from the fair
Behind the old jog-trotting mare ;
But it wasn't the returning
Of a clattering empty cart
That sent the hot blood burning
And throbbing through my heart.

THE ICE-CART

PERCHED on my city office-stool
I watched with envy while a cool
And lucky carter handled ice . . .
And I was wandering in a trice
Far from the grey and grimy heat
Of that intolerable street
O'er sapphire berg and emerald floe
Beneath the still cold ruby glow
Of everlasting Polar night,
Bewildered by the queer half-light,
Until I stumbled unawares
Upon a creek where big white bears
Plunged headlong down with flourished heels
And floundered after shining seals
Through shivering seas of blinding blue.
And, as I watched them, ere I knew
I'd stripped and I was swimming too
Among the seal-pack, young and hale,
And thrusting on with threshing tail,
With twist and twirl and sudden leap
Through crackling ice and salty deep,
Diving and doubling with my kind
Until at last we left behind
Those big white blundering bulks of death,
And lay at length with panting breath
Upon a far untravelled floe
Beneath a gentle drift of snow—
Snow drifting gently fine and white
Out of the endless Polar night,
Falling and falling evermore
Upon that far untravelled shore
Till I was buried fathoms deep
Beneath that cold white drifting sleep—
Sleep drifting deep,
Deep drifting sleep. . . .

The carter cracked a sudden whip :
I clutched my stool with startled grip,
Awakening to the grimy heat
Of that intolerable street.

TO EDWARD MARSH

(IN MEMORY OF RUPERT BROOKE)

THE night we saw the stacks of timber blaze
To terrible golden fury, young and strong
He watched between us with dream-dazzled gaze
Aflame and burning like a god of song,
As we together stood against the throng
Drawn from the midnight of the city ways.

To-night the world about us is ablaze
And he is dead, is dead. . . . Yet, young and strong,
He watches with us still with deathless gaze
Aflame and burning like a god of song,
As we together stand against the throng
Drawn from the bottomless midnight of hell's ways.

10th June 1915.

MARRIAGE

GOING my way of old,
Contented more or less,
I dreamt not life could hold
Such happiness.

I dreamt not that love's way
Could keep the golden height
Day after happy day,
Night after night.

ROSES

RED roses floating in a crystal bowl
You bring, O love ; and in your eyes I see
Blossom on blossom your warm love of me
Burning within the crystal of your soul—
Red roses floating in a crystal bowl.

FOR G.

ALL night under the moon
Plovers are flying
Over the dreaming meadows of silvery light,
Over the meadows of June
Flying and crying—
Wandering voices of love in the hush of the night.

All night under the moon
Love, though we're lying
Quietly under the thatch, in the silvery light
Over the meadows of June
Together we're flying—
Rapturous voices of love in the hush of the night.

HOME

RETURN

UNDER the brown bird-haunted eaves of thatch
The hollyhocks in crimson glory burned
Against black timbers and old rosy brick,
And over the green door in clusters thick
Hung tangled passion-flowers when we returned
To our own threshold, and with hand on latch
We stood a moment in the sunset gleam
And looked upon our home as in a dream.

Rapt in a golden glow of still delight,
Together on the threshold in the sun
We stood, rejoicing that we two had won
To this deep golden peace ere day was done,
That over gloomy plain and storm-swept height
We two, O Love, had won to home ere night.

CANDLE-LIGHT

Where through the open window I could see
The supper-table in the golden light
Of tall white candles—brasses glinting bright
On the black gleaming board, and crockery
Coloured like gardens of old Araby—
In your blue gown against the walls of white
You stood adream, and in the starry night
I felt strange loneliness steal over me.

You stood with eyes upon the candle-flame
That kindled your thick hair to burnished gold
As in a golden spell that seemed to hold
My heart's love rapt from me for evermore . . .
And then you stirred, and, opening the door,
Into the starry night you breathed my name.

FIRELIGHT

Against the curtained casement wind and sleet
Rattle and thresh, while snug by our own fire
In dear companionship that naught may tire
We sit—you listening, sewing in your seat,
Half-dreaming in the glow of light and heat,
I reading some old tale of love's desire
That swept on gold wings to disaster dire,
Then sprang re-orient from black defeat.

I close the book, and louder yet the storm
Threshes without. Your busy hands are still,
And on your face and hair the light is warm
As we sit gazing on the coals' red gleam
In a gold glow of happiness, and dream
Diviner dreams the years shall yet fulfil.

MIDNIGHT

Between the midnight pillars of black elms
The old moon hangs, a thin cold amber flame

Over low ghostly mist : a lone snipe wheels
Through shadowy moonshine droning ; and thêre steals
Into my heart a fear without a name
Out of primeval night's resurgent realms,
Unearthly terror chilling me with dread
As I lie waking wide-eyed on the bed.

And then you turn towards me in your sleep,
Murmuring, and with a sigh of deep content
You nestle to my breast, and over me
Steals the warm peace of you ; and, all fear spent,
I hold you to me sleeping quietly
Till I too sink in slumber sound and deep.

1914-15.

LIVELIHOOD:
DRAMATIC REVERIES
(1917)

TO AUDREY

*AUDREY, these men and women I have known
I have brought together in a book for you,
So that my child some day when she is grown
May know the friendly folk her father knew.*

*Wondering how parents can be so absurd,
Perhaps you'll take it idly from the shelves
And, reading, hear, as once I overheard,
These men and women talking to themselves.*

*And so find out how they faced life and earned,
As you must earn one day, a livelihood,
And how in spite of everything they learned
To take their luck through life and find it good.*

*And maybe as you share each hope and fear
And all the secrets that they never told,
For their sake you'll forgive your father, dear,
Almost for being so absurd and old.*

*And may it somewhat help to make amends
To think that in their sorrow and their mirth
Such men and women were your father's friends
In old incredible days before your birth.*

THE OLD NAIL-SHOP, 1916.

THE OLD NAIL-SHOP

I DREAMED of wings—and waked to hear
Through the low-sloping ceiling clear
The nesting starlings flutter and scratch
Among the rafters of the thatch
Not twenty inches from my head ;
And lay half-dreaming in my bed,
Watching the far elms—bolt-upright,
Black towers of silence in a night
Of stars, between the window-sill
And the low-hung eaves square-framed, until
I drowsed and must have slept a wink . . .
And wakened to a ceaseless clink
Of hammers ringing on the air . . .
And somehow, only half-aware,
I'd risen and crept down the stair,
Bewildered by strange smoky gloom,
Until I'd reached the living-room
That once had been a nail-shop shed.
And where my hearth had blazed, instead
I saw the nail-forge glowing red,
And through the stife and smoky glare
Three dreaming women standing there
With hammers beating red-hot wire
On tinkling anvils by the fire
To ten-a-penny nails, and heard—
Though none looked up or breathed a word,
The song each heart sang to the tune
Of hammers through a summer's noon
When they had wrought in that red glow
Alive a hundred years ago—
The song of girl and wife and crone
Sung in the heart of each alone . . .

The dim-eyed crone with nodding head—
He's dead, and I'll, too, soon be dead.

The grave-eyed mother gaunt with need—
Another little mouth to feed !

The black-eyed girl with eyes alight—
I'll wear the yellow beads to-night.

THE SHAFT

HE must have lost his way somehow : 'twould seem
 He'd taken the wrong turning, back a bit,
 After his lamp . . . or was it all a dream
 That he'd nigh reached the cage—his new lamp lit
 And swinging in his hand, and whistling, glad
 To think the shift was over—when he'd tripped
 And stumbled, like the daft club-footed lad
 His mother called him, and his lamp had slipped
 And smashed to smithereens, and left him there
 In pitchy dark half-stunned and with barked shins ?
 He'd cursed his luck, although he didn't care,
 Not overmuch : you suffered for your sins—
 And anyway he must be near the shaft,
 And he could fumble his way out somehow
 If he were last, and none came by. 'Twas daft
 To do a trick like thon.

And even now
 His mother would be waiting. How she'd laugh
 To hear about it ! She was always game
 For fun, she was, and such a one for chaff—
 A fellow had no chance. But 'twas the same
 With women always : you could never tell
 What they'd be at or after saying next :
 They'd such queer tricky tongues, and it was well
 For men to let them talk when they were vexed—
 Although his mother, she was seldom cross.
 But she'd be wondering now, ay, that she would—
 Hands folded in her apron, at a loss
 To know what kept him, even now she stood
 Biting her lips, he'd warrant. She aye bit
 Her lips till they were white when things went wrong
 She'd never liked his taking to the pit
 After his father'd . . . Ay, and what a song

She'd make . . . and supper cold ! It must be late.
 The last on the last shift ! After to-day
 The pit was being laid idle. Jack, his mate,
 Had left him tidying—hurrying away
 To back . . . And no night-shift . . .

If that cursed lamp

Had not gone out . . . But that was hours ago—
 How many hours he couldn't tell. The cramp
 Was in his thighs. And what could a lad know
 Who'd crawled for hours upon his hands and knees
 Through miles on miles of hot, black, dripping night
 Of low-roofed unfamiliar galleries ?
 He'd give a hundred pound to stand upright
 And stretch his legs a moment, but somehow
 He'd never reached a refuge, though he'd felt
 The walls on either hand—he'd bumped his brow
 Till he was dizzy, and the heat would melt
 The marrow in his bones, and yet he'd gone
 A dozen miles at least and hadn't found
 Even a crossway. On and on and on
 He'd crawled and crawled, and never caught a sound
 Save water dripping, dripping, or the creak
 Of settling coal. If he could only hear
 His own voice even ; but he dared not speak
 Above a whisper. . . .

There was naught to fear,

And he was not afraid of aught, not he !
 He would come on a shaft before he knew :
 He couldn't miss : the longest gallery
 Must end somewhere or other, though 'twas true
 He hadn't guessed the drift could be so long.

If he had not come straight . . . If he had turned
 Unknowing in the dark . . . If he'd gone wrong
 Once, then why not a dozen times ! It burned
 His very heart to tinder just to think
 That he, maybe, was crawling round and round
 And round and round, and hadn't caught a blink
 Of light at all or hadn't heard a sound . . .
 'Twas queer, gey queer. . . .

Or was he going daft

And only dreaming he was underground

In some black pit of hell without a shaft—
 Just one long gallery that wound and wound,
 Where he must crawl for ever with the drip
 Of lukewarm water drumming on his back ? . . .

'Twas nightmare surely had him in its grip :
 His head was like to split, his spine to crack. . . .
 If he could only call, his mother'd come
 And shake him, and he'd find himself in bed. . . .
 She'd joke his fright away. . . . But he was dumb,
 And couldn't shout to save himself. . . . His head
 Seemed full of water, dripping, dripping, dripping. . . .
 And he somehow inside it—huge and dark
 His own skull soared above him. . . . He kept slipping
 And clutching at the crumbling walls. . . . A spark
 Flared suddenly, and to a blood-red blaze
 His head was bursting, and the pain would break. . . .

'Twas solid coal he'd run against, adaze—
 Coal, sure enough—and he was broad awake
 And crawling still through that unending drift
 Of some old working long disused. He'd known
 That there were such. If he could only lift
 His head a moment, but the roof of stone
 Crushed low upon him. A gey narrow seam
 He must be in—and bad to work : no doubt
 That's why 'twas given up. He'd like to scream,
 His cut knees hurt so sorely ; but a shout
 Might bring the crumbling roof down on his head
 And squash him flat.

If he could only creep

Between the cool white sheets of his own bed,
 And turn towards the wall, and sleep and sleep—
 And dream maybe of pigeons soaring high,
 Turning and tumbling in the morning light
 With wings ashimmer in a cloudless sky.
 He'd give the world to see a bonnie flight
 Of his own pigeons rise with flapping wings,
 Soaring and sweeping almost out of sight
 Till he was dizzy watching the mad things
 Tossing and tumbling at that dazzling height.

Ay, and his homers too—if they'd come in,
 He hoped his mother'd fed them. They would be
 Fair famished after such a flight, and thin.
 But she would feed them sure enough, for she
 Liked pigeons too—would stand there at the door,
 With arms akimbo, staring at the blue,
 Her black eyes shining as she watched them soar
 Without a word till they were out of view.
 And how she laughed to hear them scold and pout,
 Ruffle and fuss—like men folk, she would say—
 Nobody knowing what 'twas all about,
 And least of all themselves. That was her way,
 To joke and laugh the tantrums out of him.
 He'd tie his neckerchief before the glass,
 And she'd call him her pigeon—Peter Prim
 Preening himself, she'd say, to meet his lass—
 Though he'd no lass, not he ! A scarf well tied,
 No gaudy colours, just a red or yellow,
 Was what he fancied. What harm if he tried
 To keep himself respectable ? A fellow—
 Though women folk might laugh and laugh . . .

And now

He wondered if he'd hear her laugh again,
 With hands on hips and sparkling eyes. His brow
 Seemed clamped with red-hot iron bands, and pain
 Shot red-hot needles through his legs—his back
 A raw and bleeding spine that bore the strain
 Of all the earth above him : the dead black
 Unending clammy night blinding his brain
 To a black blankness shot with scarlet streaks
 Of searing lightning ; and he scarcely knew
 If he'd been crawling hours or days or weeks . . .
 And now the lightning glimmered faintly blue,
 And gradually the blackness turned to grey,
 And somewhere far ahead he caught the gleam
 Of light, daylight, the very light of day,
 Day, dazzling day !

Thank God, it was no dream.

He felt a cooler air upon his face ;
 And scrambling madly for some moments more,
 Though centuries it seemed, he reached the place
 Where, through the chinks of the old crumbling door

Of a disused upcast-shaft, grey ghostly light
 Strained feebly, though it seemed the sun's own blaze
 To eyes so long accustomed to the night
 And peering blindly through the pitchy maze.

The door dropped from its hinges—and upright
 He stood at last, bewildered and adaze,
 In a strange dazzling world of flowering white.
 Plumed snowy fronds and delicate downy sprays,
 Fantastic as the feathery work of frost,
 Drooped round him from the wet walls of the shaft—
 A monstrous growth of mould, huge mould ; and lost
 In wonder he stood gaping, and then laughed
 To see that living beauty—quietly
 He laughed to see it, and awhile forgot
 All danger. He would tell his mother : she
 Would scarce know whether to believe or not—
 But laugh to hear how when he came on it
 It dazzled him. If she could only see
 That fluffy white—come on it from the pit,
 Snow-white as fantails' feathers, suddenly
 As he had, she'd laugh too : she . . .

Icy cold

Shot shuddering through him as he stepped beneath
 A trickle : he looked up : that monstrous mould
 Frightened him, and he stood with chattering teeth,
 Seeming to feel it growing over him
 Already, shutting out the fleck of sky
 That up the slimy shaft gleamed far and dim.
 'Twould flourish on his bones when he should lie
 Forgotten in the shaft. Its clammy breath
 Was choking him already. He would die,
 And no one know how he'd come by his death . . .
 Dank cold mould growing slowly . . . By and by
 'Twould cover him, and not a soul to tell. . . .

With a wild cry he tried to scramble out,
 Clutching the wall . . . Mould covered him . . . He fell
 As, close at hand, there came an answering shout.

IN THE ORCHESTRA

HE'D played each night for months, and never heard
 A single tinkly tune or caught a word
 Of all the silly songs and sillier jests ;
 And he'd seen nothing, even in the rests,
 Of that huge audience piled from floor to ceiling
 Whose stacked white faces sent his dazed wits reeling—
 He'd been too happy, and had other things
 To think of while he scraped his fiddle-strings.

But now he'd nothing left to think about—
 Nothing he dared to think of. . . .

In and out

The hollow fiddle of his head the notes
 Jingled and jangled, and the raucous throats
 Of every star rasped jibes into his ear—
 Each separate syllable precise and clear
 As though 'twere life or death if he should miss
 A single cackle, crow, or quack or hiss
 Of cockadoodling fools. . . .

A week ago

He'd sat beside her bed, and heard her low
 Dear voice talk softly of her hopes and fears—
 Their hopes and fears ; and every afternoon
 He'd watched her lying there . . .

A fat buffoon

In crimson trousers prancing—strut and cluck,
 Cackling—*A fellow never knows his luck.*
He never knows his luck. He never knows
His luck. . . . And in and out the old gag goes
 Of either ear, and in and out again,
 Playing at *You-can't-catch-me* through his brain—
'Er knows his luck. . . .

How well they thought they knew

Their luck, and such a short while since, they two
 Together. Life was lucky, and 'twas good
 Then to be fiddling for a livelihood—
 His livelihood and hers. . . .

A woman sang

With grinning teeth. The whole house rocked and rang.

In the whole house there was no empty place,
 And there were grinning teeth in every face
 Of all those faces, grinning, tier on tier,
 From orchestra to ceiling chandelier,
 That caught in every prism a grinning light
 As from the little black box up a height
 The changing limelight streamed down on the stage.
 And he was filled with reasonless dull rage
 To see those grinning teeth, those grinning rows,
 And wondered if those teeth would never close,
 But gape for ever through an endless night,
 Grinning and mowing in the green limelight.

And now they seemed to grin in mockery
 Of him ; and then, as he turned suddenly
 To face them, flaming, it was his own face
 That mowed and grinned at him from every place—
 Grimacing on him with the set white grin
 Of his own misery through that dazzling din. . . .
 Yet all the while he hadn't raised his head,
 But fiddled, fiddled for his daily bread,
 His livelihood—no longer hers. . . .

And now

He heard no more the racket and the row,
 Nor saw the aching, glittering glare, nor smelt
 The smother of hot breaths and smoke—but felt
 A wet wind on his face. . . .

He sails again

Home with her up the river in the rain—
 Leaving the grey domes and grey colonnades
 Of Greenwich in their wake as daylight fades—
 By huge dark cavernous wharves with flaring lights,
 Warehouses built for some mad London night's
 Fantastic entertainment—grimmer far
 Than Bagdad dreamt of—monstrous and bizarre
 They loom against the night, and seem to hold
 Preposterous secrets horrible and old
 Behind black doors and windows.

Yet even they

Make magic with more mystery the way
 As, hand in hand, they sail through the blue gloam
 Up the old river of enchantment home. . . .

He heard strange strangled voices—he alone
 Once more—like voices through the telephone,
 Thin and unreal, inarticulate,
 Twanging and clucking at terrific rate—
 Pattering, pattering. . . . And again aware
 He grew of all the racket and the glare,
 Aware again of the antic strut and cluck—
 And there was poor old *Never-knows-his-luck*
 Doing another turn—yet not a smile,
 Although he'd changed his trousers and his style.
 The same old trousers and the same old wheeze
 Was what the audience liked. He tried to please,
 And knew he failed, and suddenly turned old
 Before those circling faces glum and cold—
 A fat old man with cracked voice piping thin,
 Trying to make those wooden faces grin
 With frantic kicks and desperate wagging head,
 To win the applause that meant his daily bread—
 Gagger and prancing for a livelihood,
 His daily bread. . . . God ! how he understood !
 He'd fiddled for their livelihood—for her,
 And for the one who never came. . . .

A stir

Upon the stage ; and now another turn—
 The old star guttered out, too old to burn.
 And he remembered she had liked the chap
 When she'd been there that night : he'd seen her clap,
 Laughing so merrily. She liked it all—
 The razzle-dazzle of the music-hall,
 And laughing faces . . . said she liked to see
 Hard-working people laughing heartily
 After the day's work. She liked everything—
 His playing, even ! Snap !—another string !—
 The third !

And she'd been happy in that place,
 Seeing a friendly face in every face.
 That was her way—the whole world was her friend :
 And she'd been happy, happy to the end,
 As happy as the day was long. . . . And he
 Fiddled on, dreaming of her quietly.

THE SWING

'Twas jolly, swinging through the air,
With young Dick Garland sitting there
Tugging the rope with might and main,
His round face flushed, his arms astrain,
His laughing blue eyes shining bright
As they went swinging through the light—
As they went swinging ever higher
Until it seemed that they came nigher
At every swing to the blue sky—
Until it seemed that by and by
The boat would suddenly swing through
That sunny dazzle of clear blue,
And they together . . .

Yesterday

She'd hardly thought she'd get away—
The mistress was that cross, and she
Had only told her after tea
That ere she left she must set to
And turn the parlour out. She knew,
Ay, well enough, that it meant more
Than two hours' work. And so at four
She'd risen that morn and done it all,
Before her mistress went to call
And batter at her bedroom door
At six to rouse her. Such a floor—
So hard to sweep, and all that brass
To polish ! Any other lass
But her would have thrown up the place,
And told the mistress to her face . . .

But how could she ? Her money meant
So much to them at home : 'twas spent
So quickly, though so hard to earn.
She'd got to keep her place and learn
To hold her tongue. Though it was hard,
The little house in Skinner's Yard
Must be kept going : she would rob
The bairns if she should lose her job,
And they'd go hungry. . . .

Since the night
They'd brought home father, cold and white,-
Upon a stretcher, mother and she
Had had to struggle ceaselessly
To keep a home together at all.
'Twas lucky she was big and tall
And such a strong lass for fifteen.
She couldn't think where they'd have been
If she'd not earned enough to feed
And help to keep the bairns from need—
Those five young hungry mouths . . .

And she

For one long day beside the sea
Was having a rare holiday. . . .

'Twas queer that Dick should want to pay
So much good money, hardly earned,
To bring her with him. . . .

How it burned,

That blazing sun in the blue sky !
And it was good to swing so high—
So high into the burning blue,
Until it seemed they'd swing right through . . .

And good just to be sitting there,
And watching Dick with tumbled hair
And his red necktie floating free
Against the blue of sky and sea,
As up and down and up and down,
Beyond the low roofs of the town,
They swung and swung. . . .

And he was glad

To pay for her, the foolish lad,
And happy to be swinging there
With her and rushing through the air
So high into the burning blue,
It seemed that they would swing right through. . . .

'Twas well that she had caught the train—
She'd had to run with might and main
To catch it—and Dick waiting there
With tickets ready. . . .

How his hair
Shone in the sunshine, and the light
Made his blue laughing eyes so bright
Whenever he looked up at her. . . .

She'd like to sit and never stir
Again out of that easy seat—
With no more mats to shake and beat,
With no more floors to sweep, no stairs
To scrub, and no more heavy chairs
To move—for she was sleepy now. . . .

Dick's hair had fallen over his brow
Into his eyes. He shook them free
And laughed at her. 'Twas queer that he
Should think it worth his while to pay
And give her such a holiday. . . .
But she was sleepy now. 'Twas rare,
As they were rushing through the air,
To see Dick's blue eyes shining bright,
As they went swinging through the light,
As they went swinging ever higher
Until it seemed that they came nigher
At every swing to that blue sky—
Until it seemed that by and by
Their boat would suddenly swing through
That sunny dazzle of clear blue. . . .

If she could swing for evermore
With Dick above that golden shore,
With no more parlour-floors to sweep—
If she could only swing and sleep . . .
And wake to see Dick's eyes burn bright,
To see them laughing with delight
As suddenly they swung right through
That sunny dazzle of clear blue—
And they two sailing on together
For ever through that shining weather !

THE DROVE-ROAD

'Twas going to snow—'twas snowing ! Curse his luck !
And fifteen mile to travel. Here was he
With nothing but an empty pipe to suck,
And half a flask of rum—but that would be
More welcome later on. He'd had a drink
Before he left, and that would keep him warm
A tidy while ; and 'twould be good to think
He'd something to fall back on if the storm
Should come to much. You never knew with snow.
A sup of rain he didn't mind at all,
But snow was different with so far to go—
Full fifteen mile, and not a house of call.
Ay, snow was quite another story, quite—
Snow on the fell-tops with a north-east wind
Behind it, blowing steadily with a bite
That made you feel that you were stark and skinned.

And those poor beasts—and they just off the boat
A day or so, and hardly used to land—
Still dizzy with the sea, their wits afloat.
When they first reached the dock they scarce could stand,
They'd been so joggled. It's gey bad to cross,
After a long day's jolting in the train,
Thon Irish Channel, always pitch and toss—
And, heads or tails, not much for them to gain !
And then the market, and the throng and noise
Of yapping dogs ; and they stung mad with fear,
Welted with switches by those senseless boys—
He'd like to dust their jackets ! But 'twas queer,
A beast's life, when you came to think of it,
From start to finish—queerer, ay, a lot
Than any man's, and chancier a good bit.
With his ash-sapling at their heels they'd got
To travel before night those fifteen miles
Of hard fell road against the driving snow,
Half-blinded, on and on. He thought at whiles
'Twas just as well for them they couldn't know. . . .

Though, as for that, 'twas little that he knew
 Himself what was in store for him. He took
 Things as they came : 'twas all a man could do ;
 And he'd kept going somehow by hook or crook.
 And here he was, with fifteen mile of fell,
 And snow and . . . God, but it was blowing stiff !
 And no tobacco. Blest if he could tell
 Where he had lost it—but for half a whiff
 He'd swop the very jacket off his back—
 Not that he'd miss the cobweb of old shreds
 That held the holes together.

Thon cheap-jack

Who'd sold it him had said it was Lord Ted's,
 And London cut : but Teddy had grown fat
 Since he'd been made an alderman. . . . His bid ?
 And did the gentleman not want a hat
 To go with it, a topper ? If he did,
 Here was the very . . .

Hell, but it was cold,

And driving dark it was—nigh dark as night.
 He'd almost think he must be getting old
 To feel the wind so. And long out of sight
 The beasts had trotted. Well, what odds ! The way
 Ran straight for ten miles on, and they'd go straight :
 They'd never heed a by-road. Many a day
 He'd had to trudge on, trusting them to fate,
 And always found them safe. They scamper fast,
 But in the end a man could walk them down :
 They're showy trotters, but they cannot last :
 He'd race the fastest beast for half-a-crown
 On a day's journey. Beasts were never made
 For steady travelling—drive them twenty mile
 And they were done ; while he was not afraid
 To travel twice that distance with a smile.

But not a day like this ! He'd never felt
 A wind with such an edge. 'Twas like the blade
 Of the rasper in the pocket of his belt
 He kept for easy shaving. In his trade
 You'd oft to make your toilet under a dyke—
 And he was always one for a clean chin,
 And carried soap.

He'd never felt the like—
That wind, it cut clean through you to the skin.
He might be mother-naked, walking bare,
For all the use his clothes were, with the snow
Half blinding him and clagging to his hair
And trickling down his spine. He'd like to know
What was the sense of pegging steadily,
Chilled to the marrow, after a daft herd
Of draggled beasts he couldn't even see !

But that was him all over—just a word,
A nod, a wink, the price of half-and-half,
And he'd be setting out for God-knows-where
With no more notion than a yearling calf
Where he would find himself when he got there.
And he'd been travelling hard on sixty year
The same old road, the same old giddy gait ;
And he'd be walking, for a pint of beer,
Into his coffin one day, soon or late—
But not with such a tempest in his teeth,
Half-blinded and half-dothered, that he hoped !
He'd met a sight of weather on the heath,
But this beat all.

'Twas worse than when he'd groped
His way that evening down the Mallerstang—
Thon was a blizzard, thon, and he was done
And almost dropping, when he came a bang
Against a house—slap-bang, and like to stun !
Though that just saved his senses : and right there
He saw a lighted window he'd not seen,
Although he'd nearly staggered through its glare
Into a goodwife's kitchen, where she'd been
Baking hot griddle-cakes upon the peat . . .
And he could taste them now, and feel the glow
Of steady, aching, tingly, drowsy heat
As he sat there and let the caking snow
Melt off his boots, staining the sanded floor.
And that brown jug she took down from the shelf—
And every time he'd finished fetching more
And piping, *Now reach up and help yourself !*
She was a wonder, thon, the gay old wife—
But no such luck this journey. Things like that

Could hardly happen every day of life,
 Or no one would be dying but the fat
 And oily undertakers, starved to death
 For want of custom. . . . Hell ! but he would soon
 Be giving them a job. . . . It caught your breath,
 That throttling wind. And it was not yet noon.
 And he'd be travelling through it until dark.
 Dark ! 'Twas already dark, and might be night
 For all that he could see.

And not a spark
 Of comfort for him ! Just to strike a light
 And press the kindling shag down in the bowl,
 Keeping the flame well shielded with his hand,
 And puff and puff ! He'd give his very soul
 For half a pipe. He couldn't understand
 How he had come to lose it. He'd the rum—
 Ay, that was safe enough, but it would keep
 A while : you never knew what chance might come
 In such a storm. . . .

If he could only sleep . . .
 If he could only sleep. . . . That rustling sound
 Of drifting snow, it made him sleepy-like—
 Drowsy and dizzy, dithering round and round. . . .
 If he could only curl up under a dyke
 And sleep and sleep. . . . It dazzled him, that white,
 Drifting and drifting round and round and round . . .
 Just half a moment's snooze. . . . He'd be all right.
 It made his head quite dizzy, that dry sound
 Of rustling snow : it made his head go round,
 That rustling in his ears . . . and drifting, drifting. . . .
 If only he could sleep . . . he would sleep sound. . . .
 God ! he was nearly gone. . . .

The storm was lifting ;
 And he'd run into something soft and warm—
 Slap into his own beasts, and never knew.
 Huddled they were, bamboozled by the storm—
 And little wonder either when it blew
 A blasted blizzard. Still, they'd got to go :
 They couldn't stand there snoozing until night.

But they were sniffing something in the snow :
 'Twas that had stopped them, something big and white—

A bundle—nay, a woman . . . and she slept—
But it was death to sleep.

He'd nearly dropped
Asleep himself. 'Twas well that he had kept
That rum, and lucky that the beasts had stopped.
Ay, it was well that he had kept the rum :
He liked his drink, but he had never cared
For soaking by himself and sitting mum :
Even the best rum tasted better shared.

THE ROCK-LIGHT

AY, he must keep his mind clear—must not think
Of those two lying dead, or he'd go mad.
The glitter on the lenses made him blink :
The brass glared speckless : work was all he had
To keep his mind clear. He must keep it clear
And free of fancies, now that there was none,
None left but him to light the lantern—near
On fourteen hours yet till that blazing sun
Should drop into that quiet oily sea,
And he must light . . . though it was not his turn :
'Twas Jacob's—Jacob, lying quietly
Upon his bed. . . . And yet the light would burn
And flash across the darkness just as though
Nothing had happened, white and innocent
As if Jake's hand had lit it. None would know,
No seaman steering by it, what it meant
To him since he'd seen Jacob. . . .

But that way
Lay madness. He at least must keep his wits,
Or there'd be none to tell why they two lay . . .
He must keep working or he'd go to bits.

Ere sunset he must wind the lantern up.
He'd like to wind it now—but 'twould go round,
And he'd be fancying . . . Neither bite nor sup
He'd touched this morning, and the clicking sound

Would send his light head fancying . . . Jacob wound
 So madly that last time before . . . But he,
 He mustn't think of Jacob. He was bound,
 In duty bound to keep his own wits free
 And clear of fancies.

He would think of home :
 That thought would keep him whole when all else failed—
 The green door and the doorstep white as foam ;
 The window that blazed bright the night he sailed
 Out of the moonlit harbour—clean and gay
 'Twould shine this morning in the sun with white
 Dimity curtains and a grand display
 Of red geraniums glowing in the light.
 He always liked geraniums—such a red ;
 It put a heart in you. His mother too,
 She liked . . .

And she'd be lying still in bed,
 And never dreaming ! If she only knew !
 But he . . . he mustn't think of them just now—
 Must keep off fancies . . .

She'd be lying there
 Sleeping so quietly—her smooth white brow
 So calm beneath the wisps of silver hair
 Slipped out beneath her mutch-frills. She had pride
 In those fine caps, and ironed them herself.
 The very morning that his father'd died,
 Drowned in the harbour, turning to the shelf,
 She took her iron down without a word
 And ironed with her husband lying dead . . .
 As they were lying now. . . . He never heard
 Her speak or saw her look towards the bed.
 She ironed, ironed. He had thought it queer—
 The little shivering lad perched in his chair,
 And hungry—though he dared not speak for fear
 His father'd wake, and with wet streaming hair
 Should rise up from the bed. . . .

He'd thought it strange
 Then, but he understood now, understood.
 You'd got to work, or let your fancies range ;
 And fancies played the devil when they could ;

They got the upper hand if you loosed grip
 A moment. Iron frills or polish brass
 To keep a hold upon yourself, not slip
 As Jacob slipped . . .

A very burning-glass.
 The lenses were. He'd have to drop off soon
 And find another job to fill the morn,
 And keep him going till the afternoon—
 And it was not yet five ! . . .

Ay, he was born
 In the very bed where still his mother slept,
 And where his father'd lain—a cupboard-bed
 Let in the wall, more like a bunk, and kept
 Decent with curtains drawn from foot to head
 By day, though why—but 'twas the women's way ;
 They always liked things tidy. They were right—
 Better to keep things tidy through the day
 Or there would be the devil's mess by night.
 He liked things shipshape too, himself : he took
 After his mother in more ways than one.
 He'd say this for her—she could never brook
 A sloven ; and she'd made a tidy son.

'Twas well for him that he was tidy now
 That he was left, or how'd he ever keep
 His thoughts in hand . . . The Lord alone knew how
 He'd keep them tidy till . . .

Yet she could sleep :
 And he was glad, ay, glad that she slept sound :
 It did him good to think of her so still :
 It kept his thoughts from going round and round
 Like Jacob in the lighted lantern, till . . .
 God ! they were breaking loose—he must keep hold . . .

On one side, *Albert Edward, Prince of Wales*,
 Framed in cut cork, painted to look like gold—
 On the other a red frigate, with white sails
 Bellying and a blue pennon fluttering free,
 Upon a sea dead-calm. He couldn't think
 As a wee lad how ever this could be :
 And when he'd asked, his father with a wink

Had only answered laughing : *Little chaps*
Might think they knew a lot and had sharp eyes :
But only pigs could see the wind. Perhaps
The painter'd no pig by him to advise.

That was his father's way—he'd always jest
 And chuckle in his beard with eyes half-shut
 And twinkling . . . Strange to think of them at rest
 And lightless, those blue eyes beneath that cut
 Where the jagged rock had gashed his brow—the day
 His wife kept ironing those snowy frills
 To keep herself from thinking how he lay
 And wouldn't jest again. It's that that kills—
 The thinking over . . .

Jacob jested too :
 He'd always some new game, was full of chaff.
 The very morn before the lantern drew—
 Yesterday morn that was, he heard him laugh . . .
 Yesterday morn ! And was it just last night
 He'd wakened, startled, and run out, to find
 Jacob within the lantern, round the light
 Fluttering like a moth, naked and blind
 And laughing . . . Peter staring, turned to stone . . .
 The struggle . . . Peter killed . . .

And he must keep
 His mind clear at all costs, himself, alone
 On that grey naked rock of the great deep,
 Full forty miles from shore—where there were men
 Alive and breathing at this moment, ay
 Men deep in easy slumber even then,
 Who yet would waken and look on the sky.

He must keep his mind clear to light the lamp
 Ere sunset, ay, and clear the long night through
 To tell how they had died. He mustn't scamp
 The truth—and yet 'twas little that he knew . . .
 What had come over Jacob in the night
 To send him mad and stripping himself bare . . .
 And how he'd ever climbed into the light—
 And it revolving . . . and the heat and glare !

No wonder he'd gone blind—the lenses burning
 And blazing round him ; and in each he'd see
 A little naked self . . . and turning, turning,
 Till, blinded, scorched, and laughing crazily,
 He'd dropped ; and Peter . . . Peter might have known
 The truth if he had lived to tell the tale—
 But Peter'd tripped . . . and he was left alone . . .

Just thirty hours till he should see a sail
 Bringing them food and letters—food for them,
 Letters from home for them . . . and here was he
 Shuddering like a boat from stern to stem
 When a wave takes it broadside suddenly.
 He must keep his mind clear . . .

His mother lay

Peacefully slumbering. And she, poor soul,
 Had kept her mind clear, ironing that day—
 Had kept her wits about her sound and whole,
 And for his sake. Ay, where would he have been
 If she had let her fancies have their way
 That morning, having seen what she had seen !
 He'd thought it queer . . . But it was no child's play
 Keeping the upper hand of your own wits.
 He knew that now. If only for her sake,
 He mustn't let his fancies champ their bits
 Until they foamed—he must jam on the brake
 Or he . . .

He must think how his mother slept ;
 How soon she would be getting out of bed ;
 Would dress, and breakfast by the window, kept
 So lively with geraniums blazing red ;
 Would open the green door and wash the stone,
 Foam-white enough already ; then maybe
 She'd take her iron down and, all alone,
 Would iron, iron, iron steadily—
 Keeping her fancies quiet till he came . . .

To-morrow he'd be home : he'd see the white
 Welcoming threshold and the window's flame,
 And her grave eyes kindling with kindly light.

THE PLOUGH

HE sniffed the clean and eager smell
Of crushed wild garlic as he thrust
Beneath the fallows ; and a spell
He stood there munching a thick crust—
The fresh tang giving keener zest
To bread and cheese, and watched a pair
Of wagtails preening wing and breast,
Then running, flirting tails in air
And pied plumes sleeked to silky sheen,
Chasing each other in and out
The wet wild garlic's white and green.

And then, remembering, with a shout
And rattle whirring he ran back
Again into the Fair Maid's Mead
To scare the rascal thieves and black
That flocked from far and near to feed
Upon the sprouting grain. As one
They rose with clapping rustling wings—
Rooks, starlings, pigeons, in the sun
Circling about him in wide rings,
And plovers hovering over him
In mazy interweaving flight
Until it made his young wits swim
To see them up against the light,
A dazzling dance of black and white
Against the clear blue April sky—
Wings on wings in flashing flight
Swooping low and soaring high,
Swooping, soaring, fluttering, flapping,
Tossing, tumbling, swerving, dipping,
Chattering, cawing, creaking, clapping,
Till he felt his senses slipping,
And gripped his corncrake rattle tight
And flourished it above his head
Till every bird was out of sight,
And laughed when all had flown and fled
To think that he, and all alone,
Could put so many thieves to rout.

Then, sitting down upon a stone,
He wondered if the school were out—
The school where only yesterday
He'd sat at work among his mates,
At work that now seemed children's play
With pens and pencils, books and slates ;
Although he'd liked it well enough,
The hum and scuffling of the school,
And hadn't cared when Grim-and-Gruff
Would call him dunderhead and fool.
And he could see them sitting there,
His class-mates, in the lime-washed room
With fingers inked and towzled hair—
Bill Baxter with red cheeks abloom
And bright black eyes, and Ginger Jim
With freckled face and solemn look,
Who'd wink a pale blue eye at him,
Then sit intent upon his book
While, caught agiggle, he was caned.

He'd liked that room, he'd liked it all—
The window steaming when it rained,
The sunlight dancing on the wall
Among the glossy charts and maps,
The blotchy stain beside the clock
That only he of all the chaps
Knew for a Chart of Dead Man's Rock
That lies in Tiger Island Bay—
The reef on which the schooners split
And founder, that would bear away
The treasure chest of Cut-Throat-Kit
That's buried under Black Bill's bones
Beneath the purple pepper tree. . . .
A trail of clean-sucked cherry-stones
Which you must follow carefully
Across the dunes of yellow sand
Leads winding upward from the beach
Till, with a pistol in each hand
And cutlass 'twixt your teeth, you reach . . .

Plumping their fat crops peacefully
Were plovers, pigeons, starlings, rooks,

Feeding on every side while he
 Was in the land of story-books.
 He raised his rattle with a shout
 And scattered them with yell and crake . . .
 A man must mind what he's about
 And keep his silly wits awake,
 Not go woolgathering, if he'd earn
 His wage. And soon, no schoolboy now,
 He'd take on a man's job and learn
 To build a rick and drive a plough
 Like father.

Up against the sky,
 Beyond the spinney and the stream,
 With easy stride and steady eye
 He saw his father drive his team,
 Turning the red marl gleaming wet
 Into long furrows clean and true :
 And, dreaming there, he longed to set
 His young hand to the ploughshare too.

THE OLD PIPER

WITH ears undulled of age, all night he heard
 The April singing of the Otterburn.
 His wife slept quietly and never stirred,
 Though he was restless and must toss and turn ;
 But she kept going all the day, while he
 Was just a useless bundle in a chair
 And couldn't do a hand's-turn—seventy-three,
 And crippled with rheumatics . . .

It was rare,
 Hearing the curlew piping in the dark !
 'Twas queer he'd got his hearing still so keen.
 He'd be sore bothered if he couldn't hark
 To curlew piping, shrill and clear and clean—
 Ay, clean, that note !

His piping days were done,
 His fingers numb and stiff : and by the peat
 All winter, or all summer in the sun
 Beside the threshold, he must keep his seat

Day-long and listen to the Otterburn
That sang each day and night a different tune.
It knew more airs than ever he could learn
Upon the small-pipes : January to June
And June to January, every hour
It changed its music : now 'twas shrilling clear
In a high tinkling treble with a power
Of mellow undertones : and to his ear
Even the spates of winter over stones
Made no dull tuneless thundering ; he heard
No single roar, but half-a-hundred tones
Eddying and swirling, blending, yet unblurred ;
No dull-edged note, but each one razor-keen—
Though supple as the sword-blades interlaced
Over the morris-dancers' heads—and clean ! . . .
But, nay, there was no word for it : 'twas waste
Of breath to try to put the thing in words,
Though on his pipes he'd get the sense of it,
The feel—ay, even of the call of birds
He'd get some notion, though low-toned a bit :
His humming drone had not that quality
Of clean-cut piping : any shepherd-lad
Upon his penny-whistle easily
Could mimic the mere notes : and yet he had
A gift of feeling, somehow . . . He must try
To-morrow if he couldn't tune his pipes,
Must get his wife to strap them carefully . . .
Hark, a new note among the birds—a snipe's—
A small-pipe's note ! . . .

Drowsing, he did not wake
Until his wife was stirring.

Nor till noon

He told her that he'd half a mind to take
His pipes and see if he could turn a tune,
If she would fetch them. And regretfully
She brought the pipes and strapped them on and set
The bellows under his arm, and patiently
She held the reeds to his numb fingers : yet
She knew 'twas worse than useless. Work and years
Had dulled that lively touch ; each joint was stiff
And swollen with rheumatics . . .

Slowly tears

Ran down his weathered cheeks . . .

And then a whiff

Of peat-reek filled his nostrils, and quite still

He sat remembering. Memory was kind

And stripped age off him.

And along the hill

By Golden Pots he strove against the wind—

In all his days he never again had known

A wind like thon—on that November day.

For every step that he took forward, blown

Half-a-step backward, slowly he made way

Against it, buffeted and battered numb,

Chilled to the marrow, till he reached the door

To find Jack Dodd, the pitman-piper, come

To play a contest with him . . .

Nevermore

There'd be such piping !

Ay, Jack Dodd had heard

That he could play—that up among the hills

There was a lad could play like any bird

With half-a-hundred fancy turns and trills,

And give a lead even to Jack himself—

Jack Dodd, the pitmen's champion !

After tea

When they had smoked a while, down from the shelf

He'd reached his own small-pipes, and speedily

They two were at it, playing tune for tune

Against each other all the winter's night,

And all next morning till the stroke of noon,

Piping out bravely all their heart's delight.

He still could see Jack, sitting there so lean,

Long-backed, broad-shouldered, stooping, and white-faced,

With cropped black head and black eyes burning keen,

Tight-lipped, yet smiling gravely ; round his waist

His small-pipes strapped, the bellows 'neath his arm,

His nimble fingers lively at the reeds,

His body swaying to the lilting charm

Of his own magic piping, till great beads

Of sweat were glistening on his low white brow.

And he himself, a herd-lad, yellow-haired,
With wide eyes even bluer then than now,
Who sat bolt-upright in his chair and stared
Before him at the steady-glowing peat,
As if each note he played he caught in flight
From the loud wind, and in the quivering heat
Could see it dancing to its own delight.

All night the rafters hummed with piping airs,
And candle after candle guttered out ;
But not a footstep climbed the creaky stairs
To the dark bedrooms. Turn and turn about
They piped or listened ; while the wind without
Roared round the steading, battering at the door
As though to burst it wide, then with a shout
Swept on across the pitchy leagues of moor.

Pitman and shepherd piping turn for turn
The airs they loved till to the melody
Their pulses beat and their rapt eyes would burn,
Thrilled with the sight that each most loved to see—
The pitman gazing down a gallery
Of glittering black coal, an endless seam,
As through his piping stole the mystery
Of subterranean waters and of dream
Corridors dwindling everlastingly.

The shepherd from the top of Windy Gile
Looking o'er range on range of glowing hills,
A world beneath him stretching mile on mile,
Brown bent and heather laced with flashing rills—
His body flooded with the light that fills
The veins with running gold—and April light
And wind and all the melody that spills
From tumbling waters thrilled his pipes that night.

Ay, thon was playing, thon ! And nevermore
The world would hear such piping. Jack was dead,
And he so old and broken.

By the door
All day he sat remembering, and in bed

He lay beside his sleeping wife all night
 Too spent, too weary even to toss and turn.
 Dawn found him lying, strangely cold and white,
 As though still listening to the Otterburn.

THE NEWS

THE buzzer boomed and instantly the clang
 Of hammers dropped, just as the fendered bow
 Bumped with soft splash against the wharf—though now
 Again within the Yard a hammer rang,
 A solitary hammer striking steel
 Somewhere aloft, and strangely, stridently
 Echoed as though it struck the steely sky,
 The low cold steely sky.

She seemed to feel
 That hammer in her heart—blow after blow
 In a strange clanging hollow seemed to strike,
 Monotonous, unrelenting, cruel-like—
 Her heart that such a little time ago
 Had been so full, so happy with its news
 Scarce uttered even to itself.

It stopped,
 That dreadful hammer, and the silence dropped
 Again a moment : then a clatter of shoes
 And murmur of voices as the men trooped out :
 And as each wife with basket and hot can
 Hurried towards the gate to meet her man,
 She too ran forward, and then stood in doubt
 Because among them all she could not see
 The face that usually was first of all
 To meet her eyes.

Against the grimy wall
 That towered black above her to the sky,
 With trembling knuckles to the cold stone pressed
 Till the grit seemed to eat into the bone
 And her stretched arm to shake the solid stone,
 She stood and strove to calm her troubled breast—
 Her breast whose trouble of strange happiness,

So sweet and so miraculous as she
Had stood among the chattering company
Upon the ferry-boat, to strange distress
Was changed. An unknown terror seemed to lie
For her behind that wall, so cold and hard
And black above her, in the unseen Yard,
Dreadfully quiet now. Then with a sigh
Of glad relief she ran towards the gate
As he came slowly out, the last of all.

The terror of the hammer and the wall
Fell from her as, a woman to her mate,
She moved with happy heart and smile of greeting—
A young and happy wife whose only thought
Was whether he would like the food she'd brought,
Whose one desire, to watch her husband eating.

With a grave smile he took his bait from her,
And then without a word they moved away
To where some grimy baulks of timber lay
Beside the river, and 'twas quieter
Than in the crowd of munching, squatting men
And chattering wives and children. As he ate
With absent eyes upon the river set,
She chattered, too, a little now and then
Of household happenings ; and then silently
They sat and watched the grimy-flowing stream,
Dazed by the stunning din of hissing steam
Escaping from an anchored boat close by,
Each busy with their own thoughts, who till now
Had shared each thought, each feeling, speaking out
Easily, eagerly, without a doubt
As happy innocent children anyhow
The innermost secrets of their wedded life.
So as the dinner-hour went slowly by
They sat there for the first time troubled, shy—
A silent husband by a silent wife.

But she was only troubled by excess
Of happiness ; and as she watched the stream
She looked upon her life as in a dream,
Recalling all its tale of happiness

Unbroken and unshadowed since she met[^]
Her man the first time, eighteen months ago . . .
A keen blue day with sudden squalls of snow
And sudden sunshine, when she first had set
Her wondering eyes upon him—gaily clad
For football in a jersey green and red,
Knees bare beneath white shorts, his curly head
Wind-blown and wet—and knew him for her lad.

He strode towards her down the gusty street—
The wet grey pavements flashing sudden gold,
And gold the unending coils of smoke that rolled
Unceasingly overheard, fired by a fleet
Wild glint of glancing sunlight. On he came
Beside her brother—still a raw uncouth
Young hobbledehoy—a strapping mettled youth
In the first pride of manhood, that wild flame
Touching his hair to fire, his cheeks aglow
With the sharp stinging wind, his arms aswing :
And as she watched she felt the tingling sting
Of flying flakes, and in a whirl of snow
A moment he was hidden from her sight.
It passed, and then before she was aware,
With white flakes powdering his ruddy hair,
He stood before her, laughing in the light,
In all his bravery of red and green
Snow-sprinkled, and she laughed too : in the sun
They laughed, and in that laughter they were one.

Now, as with kindled eyes on the unseen
Grey river she sat gazing, she again
Lived through that moment in a golden dream . . .
And then quite suddenly she saw the stream
Distinct in its cold grimy flowing ; then
The present with its deeper happiness
Thrilled her afresh—this wonder strange and new,
This dream in her young body coming true,
Incredible, yet certain none the less—
This news, scarce spoken to herself, that she
Must break to him. She longed to see his eyes
Kindle to hear it, happy with surprise
When she should break it to him presently.

But she must wait a while yet : still too strange,
Too wonderful for words, she could not share
Even with him her secret. He sat there
So quietly, little dreaming of the change
That had come over her—but when he knew !
For he was always one for bairns, was John,
And this would be his own, their own. There shone
A strange new light on all since this was true :
All, all seemed strange, the river and the shore,
The barges and the wharves with timber piled,
And all her world, familiar from a child,
Was as a world she'd never seen before.

And he too sat with eyes upon the stream
Remembering the day when first the light
Of her young eyes with laughter sparkling bright
Kindled to his ; when as he caught the gleam
The life within him quickened suddenly
To fire, and in a world of golden laughter
They stood alone together ; and then after,
When he was playing with his mates and he
Hurtled headlong towards the goal, he knew
Her eyes were on him ; and for her alone,
Who had the merriest eyes he'd ever known,
He played that afternoon. Though until then
He'd only played to please himself, somehow
She seemed to have a hold upon him now :
No longer a boy, a man among grown men,
He'd never have a thought apart from her,
From her, his mate . . .

And then that golden night
When in a whirl of melody and light,
Her merry brown eyes flashing merrier,
They rode together in a gilded car
That seemed to roll for ever round and round
In a blind blaze of light and blare of sound,
For ever and for ever, till afar
It seemed to bear them from the surging throng
Of lads and lasses, happy in release
From the week's work in yards and factories—
For ever through a land of light and song,

While they sat rapt in silence hand in hand
 And looked into each other's merry eyes,
 They two together whirled through paradise,
 A golden glittering unearthly land,
 A land where light and melody were one,
 And melody and light a golden fire
 That ran through their young bodies, and desire
 A golden music streaming in the sun,
 Filling their veins with golden melody
 And singing fire . . .

And then when quiet fell
 And they together with so much to tell,
 So much to tell each other instantly,
 Left the hot throng and roar and glare behind,
 Seeking the darker streets, and stood at last
 In a dark lane where footsteps seldom passed,
 Lit by a far lamp and one glowing blind
 That seemed to make the darkness yet more dark,
 Between the cliffs of houses black and high
 That soared above them to the starry sky,
 A deep blue sky where spark on fiery spark
 The stars for them were kindled as they raised
 Their eyes in newborn wonder to the night ;
 And in a solitude of cold starlight
 They stood alone together hushed, and gazed
 Into each other's eyes until speech came,
 And underneath the stars they talked and talked . . .

Then he remembered how they two had walked
 Along a beach that was one golden flame
 Of yellow sand beside a flame-blue sea
 The day they wedded, that strange day of dream,
 One flame of blue and gold . . .

The murky stream
 Flowed once again before his eyes, and he
 Dropt back into the present ; and he knew
 That he must break the news that suddenly
 Had come to him last night as drowsily
 He lay beside her—startling, stern and true
 Out of the darkness flashing. He must tell
 How, as he lay beside her in the night,
 His heart had told him he must go and fight,

Must throw up everything he loved so well
 To go and fight in lands across the sea
 Beside the other lads—must throw up all,
 His work, his home . . .

The shadow of the wall

Fell on her once again, and stridently
 That hammer struck her heart, as from the stream
 She raised her eyes to his and saw their flame.
 Then back into her heart her glad news came
 As John smiled on her, and her golden dream
 Once more was all about her as she thought
 Of home, the new home that the future held
 For them—they three together. Fear was quelled
 By this new happiness that all unsought
 Had sprung from the old happiness . . .

And he,

Watching her, thought of home too. When he stept
 With her across the threshold first, and slept
 That first night in her arms so quietly,
 For the first time in all his life he'd known
 All that home meant, or nearly all—for yet
 Each night brought him new knowledge, as she met
 Him smiling on the clean white threshold-stone
 When he returned from labour in the Yard. . . .

And she'd be waiting for him soon while he
 Was fighting with his fellows oversea—
 She would be waiting for him . . .

It was hard

For him that he must go, as go he must,
 But harder far for her : things always fell
 Harder upon the women. It was well
 She didn't dream yet . . . He could only trust
 She too would feel that he had got to go,
 Then 'twould not be so hard to go, and yet . . .
 Dreaming, he saw the lamplit table, set
 With silver pot and cups and plates aglow
 For tea in their own kitchen, bright and snug,
 With her behind the teapot—saw it all :
 The coloured calendars upon the wall,
 The bright fire-irons and the gay hearthrug

She'd made herself from gaudy rags, his place
 Awaiting him with something hot-and-hot,
 His favourite sausages, as like as not,
 Between two plates for him as, with clean face
 Glowing from washing in the scullery,
 And such a hunger on him, he would sink
 Content into his chair . . .

'Twas strange to think
 All this was over, and so suddenly—
 'Twas strange and hard . . .

Still gazing on the stream,
 Her thoughts too were of home. She heard the patter
 Of tiny feet beside her and the chatter
 Of little tongues. . . .

Then loudly through their dream
 The buzzer boomed ; and all about them rose
 The men and women : soon the wives were on
 The ferry-boat, now puffing to be gone—
 The husbands hurrying ere the gates should close
 Back to the Yard. . . .

She in her dream of gold
 And he in his new desolation stood ;
 Then soberly, as wife and husband should,
 They parted, with their news as yet untold.

DAFFODILS

HE liked the daffodils ; he liked to see
 Them nodding in the hedgerows cheerily
 Along the dusty lanes as he went by,
 Nodding and laughing to a fellow—ay,
 Nodding and laughing till you'd almost think
 They too enjoyed the jest.

Without a wink
 That solemn butler said it calm and smug,
 Deep-voiced as though he talked into a jug—
*His lordship says he won't require no more
 Crocks riveted or mended till the war
 Is over.*

Lord ! He'd asked to have a wire
 The moment that his lordship should desire
 To celebrate the occasion fittingly
 By a wild burst of mending crockery,
 Like a true Englishman, and hang expense !
 He'd had to ask it, though he'd too much sense
 To lift a lash or breathe a word before
 His lordship's lordship closed the heavy door.
 And then he laughed. Lord ! but it did him good
 That quiet laugh : and somewhere in the wood
 Behind the Hall there, a woodpecker laughed
 Right out aloud as though he'd gone clean daft—
 Right out aloud he laughed, the brazen bird,
 As if he didn't care a straw who heard ;
 But then he'd not his daily bread to earn
 By mending crocks.

And now at every turn
 The daffodils were laughing quietly,
 Nodding and laughing to themselves, as he
 Chuckled—*Now there's a patriot, real true-blue !*

It seemed the daffodils enjoyed it too,
 The fun of it. He wished that he could see,
 Old solemn-mug, them laughing quietly
 At him : but then he'd never have a dim
 Idea they laughed, and, least of all, at him :
 He'd never dream they could be laughing at
 A butler.

'Twould be good to see the fat
 Old peach-cheek in his solemn black and starch
 Parading in his pompous parlour-march
 Across that field of laughing daffodils :
 'Twould be a sight to make you skip up hills,
 Ay, crutch and all, and never feel your pack,
 To see a butler in his starch and black
 Among the daffodils ridiculous
 As that old bubbly-jock with strut and fuss—
 Though that was rather rough upon the bird !
 For all his pride, he didn't look absurd
 Among the flowers, nor even that black sow
 Grunting and grubbing in among them now.

And he was glad he hadn't got a trade
 That starched the mother-wit in you and made
 A man look silly in a field of flowers.
 'Twas better mending crocks, although for hours
 You hobbled on—ay, and maybe for days,
 Hungry and cold along the muddy ways
 Without a job : and even when the sun
 Was shining 'twas not altogether fun
 To lose the chance of earning a few pence
 In these days, though 'twas well he'd got the sense
 To see the funny side of things. It cost
 You nothing, laughing to yourself : you lost
 Far more by going fiddle-faced through life
 Looking for trouble.

He would tell his wife
 When he got home ; but, lord, she'd never see
 What tickled him so mightily, not she !
 She'd only look up puzzled-like and say
 She didn't wonder at his lordship—nay,
 With tripe and trotters at the price they were,
 You'd got to count your coppers and take care
 Of every farthing.

Jack would see the fun—
 Ay, Jack would see the joke. Jack was his son,
 The youngest of the lot : and, man-alive,
 'Twas queer that only one of all the five
 Had got a twinkle in him—all the rest
 Dull as ditchwater to the merriest jest.
 Good lads enough they were, their mother's sons,
 And they'd all pluck enough to face the guns
 Out at the front : they'd got their mother's pluck ;
 And he was proud of them and wished them luck.
 That was no laughing matter—though 'twas well
 Maybe if you could crack a joke in hell
 And shame the devil. Jack, at least, would fight
 As well as any though his heart was light :
 Jack was the boy for fighting and for fun ;
 And he was glad to think he'd got a son
 Who, even facing bloody death, would see
 That little joke about the crockery,
 And chuckle as he charged.

His thoughts dropped back
 Through eighteen years, and he again saw Jack
 At the old home beneath the Malvern hills,
 A little fellow plucking daffodils,
 A little fellow who could scarcely walk,
 Yet chuckling as he snapped each juicy stalk
 And held up every yellow bloom to smell,
 Poking his tiny nose into the bell
 And sniffing the fresh scent, and chuckling still
 As though he'd secrets with each daffodil.
 Ay, he could see again the little fellow
 In his blue frock among that laughing yellow,
 And plovers in their sheeny black and white
 Flirting and tumbling in the morning light
 About his curly head : he still could see,
 Shutting his eyes, as plain as plain could be,
 Drift upon drift those long-dead daffodils
 Against the far green of the Malvern hills,
 Nodding and laughing round his little lad,
 As if to see him happy made them glad—
 Nodding and laughing . . .

They were nodding now,
 The daffodils, and laughing—yet somehow
 They didn't seem so merry now . . .

And he
 Was fighting in a bloody trench maybe
 For very life this minute . . .

They missed Jack,
 And he would give them all to have him back.

BETWEEN THE LINES

WHEN consciousness came back he found he lay
 Between the opposing fires, but could not tell
 On which hand were his friends ; and either way
 For him to turn was chancy—bullet and shell
 Whistling and shrieking over him as the glare
 Of searchlights scoured the darkness to blind day.
 He scrambled to his hands and knees ascare,
 Dragging his wounded foot through puddled clay,

And tumbled in a hole a shell had scooped
 At random in a turnip-field, between
 The unseen trenches where the foes lay cooped
 Through that unending battle of unseen,
 Dead-locked, league-stretching armies ; and quite spent
 He rolled upon his back within the pit
 And lay secure, thinking of all it meant—
 His lying in that little hole sore hit,
 But living, while across the starry sky
 Shrapnel and shell went screeching overhead—
 Of all it meant that he, Tom Dodd, should lie
 Among the Belgian turnips, while his bed . . .

If it were he indeed who'd climbed each night,
 Fagged with the day's work, up the narrow stair,
 And slipt his clothes off in the candle-light,
 Too tired to fold them neatly on a chair
 The way his mother'd taught him—too dog-tired
 After the long day's serving in the shop,
 Inquiring what each customer required,
 Politely talking weather, fit to drop . . .

And now for fourteen days and nights at least
 He hadn't had his clothes off, and had lain
 In muddy trenches napping like a beast
 With one eye open under sun and rain
 And that unceasing hell-fire . . .

It was strange

How things turned out—the chances ! You'd just got
 To take your luck in life, you couldn't change
 Your luck.

And so here he was lying shot
 Who just six months ago had thought to spend
 His days behind a counter. Still, perhaps . . .
 And now God only knew how it would end !

He'd like to know how many of the chaps
 Had won back to the trench alive, when he
 Had fallen wounded and been left for dead,
 If any . . .

This was different certainly

From selling knots of tape and reels of thread

And knots of tape and reels of thread and knots
 Of tape and reels of thread and knots of tape,
 Day in day out, and answering *Have you got's*
 And *Do you keep's* till there seemed no escape
 From everlasting serving in a shop,
 Inquiring what each customer required,
 Politely talking weather, fit to drop,
 With swollen ankles, tired . . .

But he was tired

Now : every bone was aching and had ached
 For fourteen days and nights in that wet trench,
 Just duller when he slept than when he waked,
 Crouching for shelter from the steady drench
 Of shell and shrapnel . . .

That old trench, it seemed

Almost like home to him : he'd slept and fed
 And sung and smoked in it while shrapnel screamed
 And shells went whining harmless overhead—
 Harmless at least as far as he . . .

But Dick—

Dick hadn't found them harmless yesterday
 At breakfast when he said he couldn't stick
 Eating dry bread, and crawled out the back way,
 And brought them butter in a lordly dish—
 Butter enough for all, and held it high,
 Yellow and fresh and clean as you could wish—
 When plump upon the plate from out the sky
 A shell fell, bursting . . . Where the butter went
 God only knew ! . . .

And Dick . . . He dared not think

Of what had come to Dick . . . or what it meant—
 The shrieking and the whistling and the stink
 He'd lived in fourteen days and nights. 'Twas luck
 That he still lived . . . And queer how little then
 He seemed to care that Dick . . . Perhaps 'twas pluck
 That hardened him—a man among the men—
 Perhaps . . . Yet only think things out a bit
 And he was rabbit-livered, blue with funk !
 And he'd liked Dick . . . and yet when Dick was hit
 He hadn't turned a hair. The meanest skunk
 He should have thought would feel it when his mate
 Was blown to smithereens—Dick, proud as Punch,

Grinning like sin, and holding up the plate—
 But he had gone on munching his dry hunch,
 Unwinking, till he'd swallowed the last crumb.

Perhaps 'twas just because he dared not let
 His mind run upon Dick who'd been his chum.
 He dared not now, though he could not forget.
 Dick took his luck. And, life or death, 'twas luck
 From first to last : and you'd just got to trust
 Your luck and grin. It wasn't so much pluck
 As knowing that you'd got to, when needs must,
 And better to die grinning . . .

Quiet now

Had fallen on the night : on either hand
 The guns were quiet : cool upon his brow
 The quiet darkness brooded as he scanned
 The starry sky. He'd never seen before
 So many stars. Although of course he'd known
 That there were stars, somehow before the war
 He'd never realised them—so thick-sown,
 Millions and millions. Serving in the shop,
 Stars didn't count for much ; and then at nights
 Strolling the pavements, dull and fit to drop,
 You didn't see much but the city lights.
 He'd never in his life seen so much sky
 As he'd seen this last fortnight. It was queer
 The things war taught you. He'd a mind to try
 To count the stars—they shone so bright and clear.
 One, two, three, four . . . Ah God, but he was tired . . .
 Five, six, seven, eight. . . .

Yes, it was number eight.

And what was the next thing that she required ?
 (Too bad of customers to come so late,
 At closing-time !) Again within the shop
 He handled knots of tape and reels of thread,
 Politely talking weather, fit to drop. . . .

When once again the whole sky overhead
 Flared blind with searchlights, and the shriek of shell
 And scream of shrapnel roused him. Drowsily
 He stared about him wondering : then he fell
 Into deep dreamless slumber.

.

He could see
Two dark eyes peeping at him, ere he knew
He was awake, and it again was day—
An August morning burning to clear blue.
The frightened rabbit scuttled . . .

Far away
A sound of firing . . . Up there in the sky
Big dragon-flies hung hovering . . . Snowballs burst
About them . . .

Flies and snowballs ! With a cry
He crouched to watch the airmen pass—the first
That he'd seen under fire. Lord, that was pluck—
Shells bursting all about them—and what nerve !
They took their chance and trusted to their luck.
At such a dizzy height to dip and swerve,
Dodging the shell-fire . . .

Hell ! but one was hit,
And tumbling like a pigeon plump . . .
Thank Heaven,

It righted and then turned, and after it
The whole flock followed safe—four, five, six, seven,
Yes, they were all there safe. He hoped they'd win
Back to their lines in safety : they deserved,
Even if they were Germans . . . 'Twas no sin
To wish them luck. Think how that beggar swerved
Just in the nick of time !

He too must try
To win back to the lines, though likely as not
He'd take the wrong turn ; but he couldn't lie
For ever in that hungry hole and rot.
He'd got to take his luck, to take his chance
Of being sniped by foe or friend. He'd be
With any luck in Germany or France
Or kingdom-come next morning. . . .

Drearily
The blazing day burned over him, shot and shell
Whistling and whining ceaselessly. But light
Faded at last, and as the darkness fell
He rose and crawled away into the night.

STRAWBERRIES

SINCE four she had been plucking strawberries,
 And it was only eight now, and the sun
 Already blazing. There'd be little ease
 For her until the endless day was done . . .
 Yet why should she have any ease while he—
 While he . . .

But there, she mustn't think of him,
 Fighting beneath that burning sun maybe—
 His rifle nigh red-hot and every limb
 Aching for sleep, the sweat dried on his brow
 And baking in the blaze, and such a thirst,
 Prickly and choking, she could feel it now
 In her own throat. He'd said it was the worst,
 In his last letter, worst of all to bear,
 That burning thirst—that and the hellish noise . . .

And she was plucking strawberries ; and there
 In the cool shadow of the elm their boys,
 Their baby boys were sleeping quietly.

But she was aching too ; her head and back
 Were one hot blinding ache, and dizzily
 Sometimes across her eyes the light swam black
 With dancing spots of red . . .

So ripe and sweet
 Among their fresh green leaves the strawberries lay,
 Although the earth was baking in the heat,
 Burning her soles ; and yet the summer day
 Was young enough !

If she could only cram
 A handful of fresh berries sweet and cool
 Into his mouth while he . . .

A red light swam
 Before her eyes . . .

She mustn't think, poor fool,
 What he'd be doing now, or she'd go crazed . . .
 Then what would happen to them left alone,
 The little lads !

And he would be fair 'mazed
 When he came back to see how they had grown,
 William and Dick, and how they talked. Two year
 Since he had gone ; and he had never set
 His eyes upon his youngest son. 'Twas queer
 To think he hadn't seen his baby yet—
 And it nigh fourteen months old.

Everything
 Was queer in these days. She could never guess
 How it had come about that he could bring
 Himself to go and fight. 'Twas little less
 Than murder to have taken him, and he
 So mild and easy-tempered, never one
 For drink or picking quarrels hastily . . .
 And now he would be fighting in that sun . . .
 'Twas quite beyond her. Yet somehow it seemed
 He'd got to go. She couldn't understand.
 When they had married, little had they dreamed
 What things were coming to ! In all the land
 There was no gentler husband. . . .

It was queer :
 She couldn't get the rights of it no way :
 She thought and thought, but couldn't get it clear
 Why he'd to leave his own work—making hay
 'Twould be this weather, leave his home and all,
 His wife and his young family, and go
 To fight in foreign lands and maybe fall,
 Fighting another lad he didn't know
 And had no quarrel with. . . .

The world was mad,
 Or she was going crazy. Anyhow
 She couldn't see the rights of it. Her lad
 Had thought it right to go, she knew . . .

But now
 She mustn't think about it all . . . And so
 She'd best stop puzzling and pluck strawberries . . .

And every woman plucking in the row
 Had husband, son, or brother overseas.
 Men seemed to see things differently ; and still
 She wondered sore if even they knew why
 They went themselves, almost against their will . . .

But sure enough that was her baby's cry;
 'Twas feeding time ; and she'd be glad to rest
 Her back a bit. It always gave her ease
 To feel her baby feeding at her breast,
 And pluck to go on gathering strawberries.

THE BLAST-FURNACE

AND such a night ! but maybe in that mood
 'Twas for the best ; for he was like to brood—
 And he could hardly brood on such a night
 With that squall blowing on this dizzy height
 Where he caught every breath of it—the snow
 Stinging his cheek and melting in the glow
 Above the furnace, big white flakes that fell
 Sizzling upon the red-hot furnace-bell ;
 And the sea roaring, down there in the dark,
 So loud to-night he needn't stop to hark—
 Four hundred feet below where now he stood.
 A lively place to earn your livelihood !
 His livelihood, his mother's and the three
 Young sisters', quite a little family
 Dependent on him now—on him, Jim Burn,
 Just nineteen past, to work for them and earn
 Money enough to buy them daily bread.
 Already . . .

And his father on the bed
 At home . . . gey sudden . . .

Nay, he mustn't think,

But shove his trolley to the furnace-brink
 And tip his load upon the glowing bell,
 Then back again towards the hoist. 'Twas well
 He'd work to stop him thinking. He was glad
 His mate to-night was not a talky lad,
 But Peter, mum-glum Peter, who would stare
 With such queer sulky looks upon the flare
 When round the dipping bell it shot up high
 With roar and flourish into that black sky.
 He liked to hear it roaring, liked to see
 The great flame leaping skyward suddenly.

Then sinking slowly as the bell rose up
And covered it again with red-hot cup,
When it would feed more quiet for a time
Upon the meal of iron-stone and lime
He'd fetched it in his trolley . . .

Ay, and he
Trundling his truck along that gallery
High in the air all night to keep it fed—
And all the while his father lying dead
At home—to earn a livelihood. 'Twas strange
To think what it all meant to him—the change . . .

And strange he'd never thought before how queer
It was for him, earning his bread up here
On that blast-furnace perched on the cliff-top—
Four hundred feet or so, a dizzy drop,
And he'd be feeding fishes in the sea !
How loud it roared to-night, and angrily :
He liked to hear it breaking on the shore,
And the wind's threshing and the furnace' roar,
And then the sudden quiet, a dead lull,
When you could only hear a frightened gull
Screeching down in the darkness there below,
Or a dog's yelp from the valley, or the snow
Sizzling upon hot iron. Queer indeed
To think that he had never taken heed
Before to-night or thought about it all !

He'd been a boy till this, and had no call
To turn his mind to thinking seriously.
But he'd grown up since yesterday and he
Must think a man's thoughts now—since yesterday
When he'd not had a thought but who should play
Full-back for Cleveland Rovers now that Jack
Had gone to Montreal, or should he back
Old Girl or Cleopatra for the Cup ?

In four-and-twenty hours he had grown up . . .
His father, sinking back there on the bed
With glassy eye and helpless lolling head . . .
The dropping jaw . . . the breath that didn't come
Though still he listened for it, frozen numb . . .

And then his mother . . . but he must not let
 His mind run on his mother now. And yet
 He'd often thought his father glum and grim.
 He understood now. It was not for him,
 His son, to breathe a word to her, when he,
 Her husband, had borne with her patiently
 Through all those years. Ay, now he understood
 Much, since he hadn't his own livelihood
 To think of only, but five mouths to feed—
 And the oldest the most helpless . . . He had need
 To understand a little . . .

But to-night
 He mustn't brood . . . And what a golden light
 The steady spurt of golden slag below
 Threw up upon the snow-clouds—and the snow
 Drifting down through it in great flakes of gold,
 Melting to steam or driven white and cold
 Into the darkness on a sudden gust :
 And how the cold wind caught him, as he thrust
 His empty trolley back towards the hoist,
 Straight from the sea, making his dry lips moist
 With salty breath.

'Twas strange to-night how he
 Was noticing and seeing suddenly
 Things for the first time he'd not seen before,
 Though he'd been on this shift at least a score
 Of times. But things were different somehow. Strange
 To think his father's death had wrought the change,
 And made him see things different—little things—
 The sudden flashing of a sea-gull's wings
 Out of the dark, bewildered by the glare ;
 And when the flame leapt, mum-glum Peter's hair
 Kindling a fierier red ; the wind ; the snow ;
 The unseen washing of the waves below
 About the cliff-foot. He could almost see,
 In fancy, breakers frothing furiously
 Against the crumbling cliffs—the frantic spray
 Leaping into the darkness nigh half-way
 Up the sheer height.

And now his thoughts dropped back
 Into the valley lying still and black

Behind him, and the mine where other men
 Were toiling on their night-shift, even then
 Working the iron-stone for daily bread,
 Their livelihood . . . He saw the little red
 Raw row of square brick houses—dark they'd be
 And quiet now, yet plainly he could see
 The street he lived in, ay, and Number Eight,
 His father's house—the rusty iron gate ;
 The unkempt garden and the blistered door ;
 The unwashed doorstep he'd not seen before,
 Or leastways hadn't noticed ; and the bell
 That never rang, though he remembered well
 His father'd tinkered it times out of mind ;
 And in each window a drawn yellow blind
 Broken and grimy—and that blind to-day
 Drawn down for the first time . . .

His father lay

In the front bedroom, quiet on the bed. . . .
 And he upon his usual shift . . .

She'd said,

His mother'd said, he shouldn't take his shift
 Before the undertaker'd been to lift . . .
 'Twas scarcely decent : that was what she said—
 Him working, and his father lying dead,
 And hardly cold . . .

And she to talk to him,

His son, of decency there with that grim
 Half-smile still on her husband's cold white face !

He couldn't bide a moment in the place
 Listening to her chat-chatter, knowing all
 That he knew now . . . But there, he had no call
 To blame her, when his father'd never blamed.
 He wondered in that room she wasn't shamed . . .

She didn't understand. He understood
 Now he'd grown up and had his livelihood
 And theirs to earn . . .

Lord, but that was a rare

Fine flourish the flame made, a bonnie flare
 Leaping up to the stars ! The snow had stopped—
 He hadn't heeded, and the wind had dropped

Suddenly, and the stars were shining clear.
 Over the furnace roaring he could hear
 The waves wash-washing, and could see the foam
 Lifting and falling down there in the gloam . . .
 White as his father's face. . . .

He'd never heard

His father murmur once—nay, not a word
 He'd muttered : he was never one to blame.
 And men had got to take things as they came. '

IN THE MEADOW

THE smell of wet hay in the heat
 All morning steaming round him rose
 As, in a kind of nodding doze,
 Perched on the hard and jolting seat,
 He drove the rattling, jangling rake
 Round and round the Five Oaks Mead.
 With that old mare he scarcely need
 To drive at all or keep awake.
 Gazing with half-shut sleepy eyes
 At her white flanks and grizzled tail,
 That flicked and flicked without avail
 To drive away the cloud of flies
 That hovered, closing and unclosing,
 A shimmering hum and humming shimmer,
 Dwindling dim and ever dimmer
 In his dazzled sight till, dozing,
 He seemed to hear a murmuring stream
 And gaze into a rippling pool
 Beneath thick branches dark and cool—
 And gazing, gazing till a gleam
 Within the darkness caught his eyes,
 He saw there smiling up at him
 A young girl's face, now rippling dim,
 Now flashing clear . . .

Without surprise

He marked the eyes, translucent blue,
 The full red lips that seemed to speak,
 The curves of rounded chin and cheek,
 The low broad brow, sun-tanned . . .

He knew

That face, yet could not call to mind
Where he had seen it, and in vain
Strove to recall . . . when sudden rain
Crashed down and made the clear pool blind,
And it was lost . . .

And, with a jerk
That wellnigh shook him from his seat,
He wakened to the steamy heat
And clank and rattle. Still at work
The stolid mare kept on, and still
Over her hot white flanks the flies
Hung humming. And his dazzled eyes
Closed gradually again until
He dozed. . . .

And stood within the door
Of Dinchill dairy, drinking there
Thirst-quenching draughts of stone-cold air—
The scoured white shelves and sanded floor
And shallow milk-pans, creamy-white,
Gleamed coldly in the dusky light. . . .
And then he saw her, stooping down
Over a milk-pan, while her eyes
Looked up at him without surprise
Over the shoulder of her gown—
Her fresh print gown of speedwell blue . . .
The eyes that looked out of the cool
Untroubled crystal of the pool
Looked into his again.

He knew

Those eyes now . . .

From his dreamy daze
A sudden jolting of the rake
Aroused him.

Startled broad awake
He sat upright, lost in amaze
That he should dream of her—that lass !
And see her face within the pool !

He'd known her always—why, at school
They'd sat together in the class.

He'd always liked her well enough—
 Young Polly Dale, and they had played
 At Prisoners' Base and Who's Afraid,
 At Tiggy and at Blindman's Buff,
 A hundred times together. . . .

Ay,

He'd always known her. . . . It was strange,
 Though he had noticed that a change
 Had come upon her—she was shy
 And quieter since she left school
 And put her hair up, he'd not seen
 Her face till from the glancing sheen
 It looked up at him from the pool. . .

He'd always known her : every day
 He'd nod to her as they would pass.
 He'd always known her as a lass. . . .
 He'd never know her just that way
 Again now. . . .

In a different wise

They'd meet—for how could he forget
 His dream ? The next time that they met
 He'd look into a woman's eyes.

PARTNERS

HE'D got to see it through : ay, that was plain—
 Plain as the damning figures on that page
 Which burned and bit themselves into his brain
 Since he'd first lighted on them—such an age
 Since he'd first lighted on them ! though the clock
 Had only ticked one hour out—its white face
 And black hands counting time alone. . . .

The shock

Had dropped him out of time and out of place
 Into the dead void of eternity,
 Lightless and aching, where his soul hung dead
 With wide-set staring eyes that still could see
 Those damning figures, burning hugely red

On the low aching dome of the black heaven
That crushed upon his temples, glaring bright—

10,711—

Searing his eyeballs. . . .

Yet his living sight

Was fixed on the white ledger while he sat
Before his office-table in his chair—
The chair he'd taken when he'd hung his hat
Within the cupboard door, and brushed his hair,
And stood a moment, humming *Chevy Chase*,
His hands beneath his coat-tails, by the grate,
Warming his back, and thinking of a case
They'd won outright with costs and . . .

Phil was late—

But Phil was Phil. At home they used to call
His brother "Better-late". At every turn
He'd had to wait for Phil. And after all
There wasn't so much doing since that concern . . .

And little thinking anything was wrong,
Laying his hand upon his own armchair
To draw it out, still humming the old song,
He'd seen the note from Philip lying there
Upon the open ledger.

Once he read

The truth, unrealising, and again ;
But only two words echoed in his head
And buzzed uncomprehended in his brain—
"Embezzled" and "absconded".

Phil had spelt

His shame out boldly in his boyish hand—
And then those figures . . .

Dizzily he felt

The truth burn through him. He could hardly stand,
But sank into his chair with eyes set wide
Upon those damning figures, murmuring *Phil !*
And listening to the whirr of wheels outside
And sparrows cheeping on the window-sill—
Still murmuring *Phil, poor Phil !*

But Phil was gone,

And he was left alone to bear the brunt. . . .
Phil ! Little Phil !

And still the morning 'shone
Bright at the window. . . .

Callous, curt and blunt,
The world would call his brother—not that name !
And yet names mattered little at this pass.
He'd known that Phil was slack—but this !

The blame
Was his as much as Phil's : as in a glass
Darkly he saw he'd been to blame as well ;
And he would bear the blame. Had he not known
That Phil was slack ? For all that he could tell,
If he'd looked after Phil this might . . .

Alone
He'd got to face the music. He was glad
He was alone. . . . And yet for Phil's own sake
If he had only had the pluck, poor lad,
To see the thing through like a man and take
His punishment !

For him was no escape
Either by Phil's road or that darker road.
He knew the cost and how the thing would shape—
Too well he knew the full weight of the load
He strapped upon his shoulders. It was just
That he should bear the burden on his back.
He'd trusted Phil ; and he'd no right to trust
Even his brother, knowing he was slack,
When other people's money was at stake.
He'd too been slack : and slackness was a crime—
The deadliest crime of all. . . .

And broad awake
As in a nightmare he was “ doing time ”
Already. . . .

Yet he'd only trusted Phil,
His brother Phil—and it had come to this !

Always before whenever things went ill
His brother'd turned to him for help, and his
Had always been the hand stretched out to him.
Now Phil had fled even him. If he'd but known !

Brooding, he saw with tender eyes grown dim
Phil running down that endless road alone—

Phil running from himself down that dark road,
The road that leads nowhither, which is hell ;
And yearning towards him, bowed beneath his load,
And murmuring *Little Phil !*

Again he fell
Into the dead void of eternity,
Lightless and aching, where his soul hung dead
With wide-set staring eyes that still could see
Those damning figures, burning hugely red
On the low aching dome of the black heaven
That crushed upon his temples, glaring bright—
10,711—
Searing his eyeballs. . . .

When a ripple of light
Dappled his desk. . . .

And they were boys together
Rambling the hills of home that April day,
Stumbling and plunging knee-deep through the heather
Towards Hallypike, the little lough that lay
Glancing and gleaming in the sun, to search
For eggs of inland-breeding gulls. He heard
The curlew 'piping, saw a blackcock perch
On a stone dyke hard-by—a lordly bird
With queer curled tail. And soon they reached the edge,
The quaggy edge of Hallypike ; and then
The gulls rose at them screaming from the sedge
With flapping wings ; and for a while like men
They stood their ground among the quaking moss
Until, half-blinded by the dazzling white
Of interweaving wings and at a loss
Which way to turn, they only thought of flight
From those fierce cruel beaks and hungry eyes—
Yet stood transfixed, each on a quaking clump,
With hands to ears to shut out those wild cries.
Then the gulls closed on Phil, and with a jump
And one shrill yell he'd plunged into the lake
Half-crazed with terror. Only just in time
He'd stumbled after through the quag aquake
And caught him by the coat, and through black slime
Had dragged him into safety, far away
From the horror of white wings and beaks and eyes.

And he remembered now how Philip lay
Sobbing upon his bosom. . . .

Now those cries
Were threatening Phil again, and he was caught
Blind in a beating, baffling, yelling hell
Of wings and beaks and eyes. And there was naught
That he could do for him. . . .

Once more he fell
Into the dead void of eternity,
Lightless and aching, and his soul hung dead
With wide-set staring eyes that still could see
Those damning figures, burning hugely red
On the low aching dome of the black heaven
That crushed upon his temples, glaring bright—
10,711—

Searing his eyeballs. . . . Then the pitchy night
Rolled by. . . .

And now that summer noon they sat
In the shallows of Broomlee Lough, the water warm
About their chins, and talked of this and that ;
And heeded nothing of the coming storm
Or the strange breathless stillness everywhere
On which the dull note of the cuckoo fell,
Monotonously beating through dead air,
A throbbing pulse of heat made audible.
And even when the sky was brooding grey
They'd slowly dressed and started to walk round
The mile-long lake ; but when they'd got half-way
A heavy fear fell on them, and they found
That they were clutching hands. The still lough gleamed
Livid before them 'neath a livid sky,
Sleek and unrippling. . . . Suddenly they screamed
And ran headlong for home, they knew not why—
Ran stumbling through the heath and never stopped,
And still hot brooding terror on them pressed
When they had climbed up Sewingshields and dropped
Dead-beat beneath the dyke : and on his breast
Poor frightened Phil had sobbed himself to sleep.

And even when the crashing thunder came,
Phil snuggled close in slumber sound and deep,
And he alone had watched the lightning flame

Across the fells and flash on Hallypike. . . .

And, in his office chair, he felt once more

His back against the sharp stones of the dyke

And Phil's hot clutching arms. . . .

An outer door

Banged in the wind and roused him. . . .

He was glad,

In spite of all, to think he'd trusted Phil.

He'd got to see it through. . . .

He saw the lad,

His little frightened brother, crouching still

Beneath the unknown horror of the sky.

That he might take him in his arms once more !

Now he must pull himself together—ay !

For there was some one tapping at the door.

THE ELM

THE wind had caught the elm at last.

He'd lain all night and wondered how

'Twas bearing up against the blast :

And it was down for ever now,

Snapped like a match-stick. He at dawn

Had risen from his sleepless bed

And, hobbling to the window, drawn

The blind up and had seen, instead

Of that brave tree against the sky,

Thrust up into the windless blue

A broken stump not ten feet high. . . .

And it was changed, the world he knew,

The world he'd known since he, tiptoe,

Had first looked out beneath the eaves

And seen that tree at dawn aglow,

Soaring with all its countless leaves

In their first glory of fresh green

Like a big flame above the mead.

How many mornings he had seen
 It soaring since—well it would need
 A better head to figure out
 Than his, now he was seventy-five
 And failing fast without a doubt—
 The last of fifteen left alive
 That in that very room were born,
 Ay, and upon that very bed
 He'd left at daybreak.

Many a morn
 He'd seen it stark against the red
 Of winter sunrise, or in spring—
 Some April morning, dewy clear,
 With all its green leaves glittering
 In the first sunbeams, soaring sheer
 Out of low mist.

The morn he wed
 It seemed with glistening jewels hung. . . .
 And, fifty-year, his wife was dead—
 And she so merry-eyed and young. . . .

And it was black the night she died,
 Dead-black against the starry sky,
 When he had flung the window wide
 Upon the night so crazily,
 Instead of drawing down the blind
 As he had meant. He was so dazed
 And fumbled so, he couldn't find
 The hasp to pull it to, though crazed
 To shut them out—that starry night
 And that great funeral-plume of black,
 So awful in the cold starlight.
 He'd fumbled till they drew him back
 And closed it for him. . . .

And for long
 At night he could not bear to see
 An elm against the stars.

'Twas wrong,
 He knew, to blame the innocent tree—
 Though some folk hated elms and thought
 Them evil, for their great boughs fell
 So suddenly. . . .

George Stubbs was caught
 And crushed to death. You couldn't tell
 What brought that great bough crashing there
 Just where George sat—his cider-keg
 Raised to his lips—for all the air
 Was still as death. . . . And just one leg
 Stuck silly-like out of the leaves,
 When Seth waked up ten yards away
 Where he'd been snoozing 'mid the sheaves.

'Twas queer-like, but you couldn't say
 The tree itself had been to blame.
 That bough was rotten through and through,
 And would have fallen just the same
 Though George had not been there. . . .

'Twas true

That undertakers mostly made
 Cheap coffins out of elm. . . .

But he,

Well, he could never feel afraid
 Of any living thing. That tree,
 He'd seemed to hate it for a time
 After she died. . . . And yet somehow
 You can't keep hating without rhyme
 Or reason any live thing.

Now

He grieved to see it fallen low,
 With almost every branch and bough
 Smashed into splinters. All that snow,
 A dead weight, and that heavy blast
 Had dragged it down ; and at his feet
 It lay, the mighty tree, at last.

And he could make its trunk his seat
 And rest awhile this winter's noon
 In the warm sunshine : he could just
 Hobble so far : and very soon
 He'd lie as low himself. He'd trust
 His body to that wood.

Old tree,

So proud and brave this many a year,
 Now brought so low !

Ah ! there was he,
 His grandson Jo, with never a fear
 Riding a bough unbroken yet—
 A madcap like his father, Jim !
 He'd teach him sense if he could get
 Behind him with a stick, the limb !

THE DOCTOR

HE'D soon be home. The car was running well,
 Considering what she'd been through since the bell
 Tumbled him out again—just as his head
 Sank in the pillow, glad to get to bed
 After the last night's watching and a day
 Of travelling snowy roads without a stay—
 To find the tall young shepherd at the door.

The wife's gey bad in childbed—and no more
 He'd said till they were seated in the car
 And he was asked—Where to ? and was it far ?—
The Scalp he'd said—*Some fifteen mile or so.*

And they'd set out through blinding squalls of snow
 To climb the hills. The car could scarcely crawl
 At times, she skidded so ; and with that squall
 Clean in his eyes he scarcely saw to steer—
 His big lamps only lit a few yards clear.
 But those young eyes beside him seemed to pierce
 The fifteen miles of smother fuming fierce
 Between the husband and his home—the light
 In that far bedroom-window held his sight
 As though he saw clean through the blinding squall
 To the little square stone steading that held all
 His heart—so solitary bleak and grey
 Among the snow-drifts, on the windy brae
 Beyond the burn that, swollen loud and black,
 Threatened the single plank that kept the track
 Between them and the outside world secure.
 If that were gone when he got back, for sure

They'd have to plunge waist-deep in that black spate
 And cling for life upon the old sheep-gate,
 If it were not gone too, to cross at all. . . .

And shé ! He saw the shadow on the wall
 Behind the bed, his mother's, as she bent
 To comfort Mary, for a moment spent
 By the long agony. . . . That shadow seemed
 So black and threatening, and the candle gleamed
 So strangely in those wild bright eyes. . . .

They'd be

Lucky to reach the bank at all, for he
 Had been through that burn once on such a night,
 And he remembered how he'd had to fight
 The frothing flood, rolled over, beaten, bruised,
 And wellnigh dragged right under, though well used
 To every mood and temper of the burn.

Yet, though he gazed so far, he missed no turn
 In all those climbing miles of snow-blind way
 Until the car stopped dead at Gallows Brae,
 And they'd to leave her underneath a dyke
 And plunge knee-deep through drift-choked slack and syke
 Until they reached the plank that still held fast,
 Though quivering underfoot in that wild blast
 Like a stretched clothes-line. Dizzily they crossed
 Above that brawling blackness, torn and tossed
 To flashing spray about the lanthorn ; then,
 Setting their teeth, they took the brae like men
 At desperate hazard charging certain death :
 And nigh the crest the doctor reeled—his breath
 Knocked out of him, and, sinking helplessly,
 Knew nothing till he wakened drowsily
 Before the peat, and found himself alone
 In a strange kitchen.

But a heavy moan

Just overhead recalled him, and he leapt
 Instantly to his feet alert, and crept
 Upstairs with noiseless step until he came
 To the low bedroom where the candle-flame
 Showed the old woman standing by the bed
 On which the young wife lay. His noiseless tread

Scarce startling them, he paused a moment while
 Those strained white lips and wild eyes strove to smile
 Bravely and tenderly as the husband bent
 Over the bed to kiss her, and then went
 Without a word, closing the creaking door,
 And crept downstairs on tiptoe, and once more
 The room was filled with moaning.

.

When at last

His part was done, and danger safely past,
 And into a wintry world with lusty crying
 That little life had ventured, and was lying
 Beside the drowsy mother on the bed,
 Downstairs the doctor stole with noiseless tread
 And, entering the kitchen quietly,
 Saw the young father gazing fearfully
 Into the fire with dazed unseeing eyes.
 He spoke to him ; and still he did not rise,
 But sat there staring with that senseless gaze
 Set on the peat that with a sudden blaze
 Lit up his drawn face, bloodless 'neath its tan.
 But when the doctor stooped and touched the man
 Upon the shoulder, starting to his feet
 He staggered, almost falling in the peat,
 Whispering—*She's safe ? She's safe ?*

And then he leapt

Suddenly up the stair. The doctor crept
 Speedily after him without a sound :
 But when he reached the upper room he found
 He wasn't needed. The young husband bent
 Over his wife and baby, quiet, content :
 Then the wife stirred, opening her eyes, and smiled,
 And they together looked upon their child.

The doctor drowsed till dawn beside the peat,
 Napping uneasily in the high-backed seat,
 Half-conscious of the storm that shook the pane
 And rattled at the door. . . .

And now again

He seemed to stand beside the lonely bed
 He stood beside last night—the old man dead

With staring eyes, dropt jaw, and rigid grin
 That held the stark white features, peaked and thin—
 The old man left alone with not a friend
 To make his body seemly in the end
 Or close his eyes. . . .

And then the lusty cry
 Of that young baby screaming hungrily
 Broke through his dream. . . .

.

The car was running well
 He'd soon be home and sleeping—till the bell
 Should rouse him to a world of old men dying
 Alone, and hungry newborn babies crying.

THE LAMP

SHE couldn't bring herself to bar the door—
 And him on the wrong side of it. Nevermore
 She'd hear his footstep on the threshold-stone. . . .
You're not afraid to lie all night alone,
And Jim but newly drowned? they'd asked; and she
 Had turned upon her neighbours wonderingly.
Afraid of what? she said.—*Afraid of him*
 The neighbours answered.—*Me—afraid of Jim!*
And after all these years! she cried. *And he—*
How can you think that he'd bring harm to me?
You know him better surely, even you!
And I . . . Then they had left her, for they knew
 Too well that any word that they could say
 Would help her nothing.

When they'd gone away,
 Leaving her to her trouble, she arose
 And, taking from the kist his Sunday clothes,
 Folded so neatly, kept so carefully
 In camphor free of moth, half-absently
 She shook them out and hung them up to air
 Before the fire upon his high-backed chair;
 And then when they were aired she folded them
 Carefully seam to seam and hem to hem,

And smoothing them with tender hands, again
 She laid them in the kist where they had lain
 Six days a week for hard on forty-year. . . .

Ay, forty years they'd shared each hope and fear—
 They two together—yet she might not tend
 With loving hands his body in the end.
 The sea had taken him from her, and she—
 She could do nothing for him now—the sea
 Had taken him from her ; and nevermore
 Might she do anything for him. . . .

The door

Flapped in the wind. She shut and sneaked it tight,
 But did not bolt it : then she set a light
 In the white-curtained window, where it shone
 As clearly as on each night that he had gone
 Out with the boats in all that forty-year ;
 And each night she had watched it burning clear,
 Alone and wakeful. . . . And, though lonelier,
 She'd lie to-night as many a night she'd lain
 On her left side with face turned towards the pane,
 So that if she should wake at once she'd see
 If still her beacon-light burned steadily,
 Feeling that maybe somewhere in the night
 Of those dark waters he could see the light
 Far-off and very dim, a little spark
 Of comfort burning for him through the dark,
 And even though it should dwindle from his sight
 It seemed to her that he must feel the light
 Burning within his heart, the light of home. . . .

From those black cruel waters sudden foam
 Flashed as she gazed ; and with a shuddering stir,
 As though cold drowning waves went over her,
 She stood a moment gasping. Then she turned
 From the bright window where her watch-light burned
 And, taking off her clothes, crept into bed
 To see if she could sleep : but when her head
 Touched the cold pillow such hot restlessness
 She felt, she'd half-a-mind to rise and dress
 Each moment as she tossed from side to side.
 The bed to-night seemed very big and wide

And hard and cold to her, though a hot ache -
Held her whole body tingling wide awake,
Turning and tossing half the endless night.

Then quieter she lay and watched the light
Burning so steadily, until the flame
Dazzled her eyes, and golden memories came
Out of the past to comfort her. She lay
Remembering—remembering that day,
Nigh twenty years since, when she'd thought him drowned,
And after all . . .

She heard again the sound
Of seas that swept, a solid wall of green,
Such seas as living eyes had never seen,
Over the rockbound harbour, with a roar
Rushing the beach, tossing against the door
Driftwood and old cork-floats, slashing the pane
With flying weed again and yet again,
As, toppling to disaster, sea on sea
Beneath the crashing wind broke furiously
Almost upon the very threshold-stone
In white tumultuous thunder. All alone
She watched through that long morn -too much afraid
To stir or do a hand's-turn, her heart prayed
One prayer unceasingly, though not a word
Escaped her lips ; till in a lull she heard
A neighbour call out that the *Morning Star*
Had gone ashore somewhere beyond Hell Scar,
Hard by the Wick, and all . . . And then the roar
Drowned everything. . . .

And how she reached the door
She never knew. She found herself outside
Suddenly face to face with that mad tide,
Battling for breath against a wind that fought
Each inch with her as she turned north, and caught
Her bodily and flung her reeling back
A dozen times before she reached the track
That runs along the crag-top to the Head.
Bent double still she struggled on half-dead,
For not a moment could she stand upright
Against the wind, striving with all her might

To reach the Wick. She struggled through that wind
 As through cold clinging water, deaf and blind ;
 And numb and heavy in that icy air
 Her battered body felt, as though stark-bare
 She floundered in deep seas. Once in a lull
 Flat on her face she fell. A startled gull
 Rose skirling at her ; and with burning eyes
 She lay a moment, far too scared to rise,
 Staring into a gully black as night
 In which the seething waters, frothing white,
 Thundered from crag to crag and, baffled, leapt
 A hundred feet in air. She'd nearly stepped
 Into that gully. Just in time the wind
 Had dropped : one moment more and, headlong, blind,
 She'd tumbled into that pit of death . . . and Jim,
 If he were living yet . . .

The thought of him

Startled her to her feet ; and on once more
 Against a fiercer wind along the shore
 She struggled with set teeth, and dragging hair
 Drenched in the sousing spray that leapt in air,
 Spinning and hissing, smiting her like hail.

Then, when it almost seemed that she must fail
 To reach the Wick alive or dead, she found
 That she was there already. To the ground
 She sank dead-beat. Almost too faint and weak
 To lift her head, her wild eyes sought the creek ;
 But there she saw no sign of boat or man—
 Only a furious smother of seas that ran
 Along a slanting jetty ceaselessly.
 Groping for life, she searched the spumy sea
 For sail or sign in vain—then knew no more . . .
 Till she was lifted by strong arms that bore
 Her safely through the storm, lying at rest
 Without a care upon her husband's breast,
 Unquestioning till she reached home, content
 To feel his arms about her as he bent
 Over her tenderly and breathed her name.

And then she heard how back from death he came
 Unscathed to her, by some strange mercy thrown

Alive almost upon his threshold-stone—
When, hearing where she'd gone, he'd followed her
Hot-foot. . . .

The breath of dawn began to blur
The shining pane with mist. . . . And nevermore
His foot would follow her along that shore.
The sea had taken him from her at last,
Had taken him to keep. . . .

Then from the past
She waked with eyes that looked beyond the light,
Still burning clearly, into the lingering night,
Black yet beyond the steaming window-pane
Down which big glistening drops of gentle rain
Trickled until they dazzled her; and she lay
Again remembering—how ere break of day
When she was young she'd had to rise and go
Along the crag-top some five-mile or so
With other lads and lasses to Skateraw
To gather bait. . . .

Again her young eyes saw
Those silent figures with their creels, dead-black
Against the stars, climbing the sheer cliff-track
In single file before her, or quite bright
As suddenly the lighthouse flashed its light
Full on them, stepping up out of the night
On to the day-bright crag-top—kindling white,
A moment windy hair and streaming grass.
Again she trudged, a drowsy little lass,
The youngest of them all, across dim fields
By sleeping farms and ruined roofless bields,
Frightened by angry dogs that roused from sleep
Yelped after them, or by a startled sheep
That scurried by her suddenly, while she
Was staring at a ship's lights out at sea
With dreaming eyes, or counting countless stars
That twinkled bright beyond the jagged scars;
Or stumbled over a slippery shingle-beach
Beneath her creel, and shuddered at the screech
And sudden clamour of wings that round her flapped.
Again she felt that cruel cold: though hapt
In the big shawl, the raw wind searched her through
Till every bone ached. Then once more she knew

Brief respite, when at last they reached Skateraw
And rested till the dawn.

Again she saw
Those dark groups sitting quiet in the night,
Awaiting the first blink of morning-light
To set to work gathering the bait, while she
Sang to them as they sat beside the sea.
They always made her sing, for she'd a voice
When she was young, she had, and such a choice
Of words and airs by heart : and she was glad
To turn a tune for any lass or lad
Who'd ask her, always glad to hear them say—
Come, Singing Sally, give us " Duncan Gray ",
" The De'il among the Tailors ", " Elsie Marley ",
" The Keel Row ", or " The Wind among the Barley ",
And always gladdest when 'twas Jim would ask.

Again, as they would settle to their task
Of gathering clammy mussels, that cold ache
Stole through her bones. It seemed her back must break
Each time she stooped or lifted up her head,
Though still she worked with fingers raw and red
Until her creel was filled. But, toiling back,
Staggering beneath her load along her track,
Jim would come up with her and take her creel
And bear it for her, if she'd sing a reel
To keep their hearts up as they trudged along.
Half-numb with sleep, she'd start a dancing-song
And sing, the fresh wind blowing in her face,
Until the dancing blood began to race
Through her young body and her heart grew light,
Forgetting all the labours of the night. . . .
Once more she walked light-foot to that gay air,
The wind of morning fresh on face and hair,
A girl again. . . .

And Jim, 'twas always he
Who bore her burden for her. . . .

Quietly
With eyes upon the golden lamp she lay,
While all unseen of her the winter day
Behind the dim wet pane broke bleak and cold.

She seemed to look upon a dawn of gold
 That kindled every dancing wave to glee
 As she walked homeward singing by the sea,
 As she walked homeward with the windy stir
 Fresh in her flying hair, and over her
 Jim bent—young lucky Jim—a kindly lad
 Taking the creel ; and her girl's heart was glad
 As . . .

Clasped within each other's arms, the deep
 Closed over them . . .

Smiling, she fell asleep.

THE PLATELAYER

TAPPING the rails as he went by
 And driving the slack wedges tight,
 He walked towards the morning sky
 Between two golden lines of light
 That dwindled slowly into one
 Sheer golden rail that ran right on
 Over the fells into the sun.

And dazzling in his eyes it shone,
 That golden track, as left and right
 He swung his clinking hammer—ay,
 'Twas dazzling after that long night
 In Hindfell tunnel, working by
 A smoky flare and making good
 The track the rains had torn. . . .

Clink, clink,

On the sound metal—on the wood
 A duller thwack !

It made him blink,
 That running gold. . . .

'Twas sixteen hours
 Since he'd left home—his garden smelt
 So fragrant with the heavy showers
 When he left home ; and now he felt
 That it would smell more fresh and sweet

After the tunnel's reek and fume
 Of damp warm cinders. 'Twas a treat
 To come upon the scent and bloom
 That topped the cutting by the wood
 After the cinders of the track,
 The cinders and tarred sleepers—good
 To lift your eyes from gritty black
 To that fresh blaze of green and red. . . .
 And she'd be waiting by the fence,
 And with the baby . . .

Straight to bed

He'd make, if he had any sense,
 And sleep the day ; but like as not
 When he'd had breakfast he'd turn to
 And hoe the back potato-plot—
 'Twould be one mass of weeds he knew.
 You'd think each single drop of rain
 Turned as it fell into a weed.
 You seemed to hoe and hoe in vain :
 Chickweed and groundsel didn't heed
 The likes of him—and bindweed, well,
 You hoed and hoed—still its white roots
 Ran deeper. . . .

'Twould be good to smell

The fresh-turned earth, and feel his boots
 Sink deep into the brown wet mould,
 After hard cinders. . . .

And maybe

The baby, sleeping good as gold
 In its new carriage under a tree,
 Would keep him company while his wife
 Washed up the breakfast things.

'Twas strange,

The difference that she made to life,
 That tiny baby girl.

The change

Of work would make him sleep more sound.
 'Twas sleep he needed—that long night
 Shovelling wet cinders underground
 With breaking back, the smoky light
 Stinging his eyes till they were sore. . . .

He'd worked the night that she was born,
 Standing from noon the day before
 All through the winter's night till morn,
 Laying fog-signals on the line
 Where it ran over Devil's Ghyll. . . .

And she was born at half-past nine,
 Just as he'd stood aside until
 The Scots Express ran safely by. . . .
 He'd but to shut his eyes to see
 Those windows flashing blindingly
 A moment through the blizzard—he
 Could feel again that slashing snow
 That seemed to cut his face.

But they,

The passengers, they couldn't know
 What it cost him to keep the way
 Open for them. So snug and warm
 They slept or chattered, while he stood
 And faced all night that raking storm—
 The little house beside the wood
 For ever in his thoughts—and he
 Not knowing what was happening !

But all went well as well could be
 With Sally and the little thing :
 And it had been worth while to wait
 Through that long night with work to do,
 To meet his mother at the gate
 With such good news, and find it true—
 Ay, truer than the truth.

He still

Could see his wife's eyes as he bent
 Over the bairn. . . .

The Devil's Ghyll

Had done its worst, and he was spent ;
 But he'd have faced a thousand such
 Wild nights as thon, to see that smile
 Again and feel that tender touch
 Upon his cheek. 'Twas well worth while

With such reward : and it was strange,
 The difference such a little thing
 Could make to them—how it could change
 Their whole life for them, and could bring
 Such happiness to them, though they
 Had seemed as happy as could be
 Before it came to them.

The day

Was shaping well : and there was she,
 The lassie sleeping quietly
 Within her arms, beside the gate.

The storm had split that lilac tree :
 But he was tired, and it must wait.

MAKESHIFTS

AND after all 'twas snug and weather-tight,
 His garret : that was much on such a night—
 To be secure against the wind and sleet
 At his age and not wandering the street,
 A shuffling, shivering bag-of-bones.

And yet

Things would be snugger if he could forget
 That bundle of old dripping rags that slouched
 Before him down the Canongate, and crouched
 Close to the swing-doors of the Spotted Cow.
 Why, he could see that poor old sinner now,
 Ay, and could draw him, if he'd had the knack
 Of drawing anything—a steamy black
 Dilapidation basking in the glare,
 And sniffing with his swollen nose in air
 To catch the hot reek when the door swings wide
 And shows the glittering paradise inside,
 Where men drink golden fire on seats of plush,
 Lolling like gods : he stands there in the slush
 Shivering, from squelching boots to sopping hat
 One sodden clout, and blinking like a bat
 Bedazzled by the blaze of light : his beard
 Waggles and drips from lank cheeks pocked and seared ;

And the whole dismal night about him drips,
As he stands gaping there with watering lips
And burning eyes in the cold sleety drench,
Afire with thirst that only death may quench.

Yet he had clutched that sixpence greedily
As if sixpennyworth of rum maybe
Would satisfy that thirst. Who knows ! It might
Just do the trick perhaps on such a night,
And death would be a golden fiery drink
To that old scarecrow. 'Twould be good to think
His money'd satisfied that thirst, and brought
Rest to those restless fevered bones that ought
Long since to have dropped for ever out of sight.
It wasn't decent, wandering the night
Like that—not decent. While it lived it made
A man turn hot to see it, and afraid
To look it in the face, lest he should find
That bundle was himself, grown old and blind
With thirst unsatisfied.

He'd thirsted too
His whole life long, though not for any brew
That trickled out of taps in gaudy bars
For those with greasy pence to spend !
The stars
Were not for purchase, neither bought nor sold
By any man for silver or for gold.

Still, he was snug and sheltered from the storm :
He sat by his own hearth secure and warm,
And that was much indeed on such a night.
The little room was pleasant with the light
Glowing on lime-washed walls, kindling to red
His copper pots and, over the white bed,
The old torn Rembrandt print to golden gloom.
'Twas much on such a night to have a room—
Four walls and ceiling storm-tight overhead.
Denied the stars—well, you must spend instead
Your sixpences on makeshifts : life was naught
But toiling for the sixpences that bought
Makeshifts for stars.

'Twas snug, to hear the sleet
 Lashing the panes and sweeping down the street
 Towards Holyrood and out into the night
 Of hills beyond. Maybe it would be white
 On Arthur's Seat to-morrow, white with snow—
 A white hill shining in the morning glow
 Beyond the chimney-pots, that was a sight
 For any man to see, a snowy height
 Soaring into the sunshine. He was glad,
 Though he must live in slums, his garret had
 A window to the hills.

And he was warm,
 Ay, snug and warm, shut in here from the storm.
 The sixpences bought comfort for old bones
 That else must crouch all night on paving-stones
 Unsheltered from the cold.

'Twas hard to learn
 In his young days that this was life—to earn
 By lifelong labour just your board and bed,
 Although the stars were singing overhead,
 The Sons of Morning singing together for joy
 As they had sung for every bright-eyed boy
 With ears to hear since life itself was young—
 And leave so much unseen, so much unsung.

He'd had to learn that lesson. 'Twas no good
 To go star-gazing for a livelihood
 With empty belly. Though he had a turn
 For seeing things, when you have got to earn
 Your daily bread first, there is little time
 To paint your dream or set the stars to rhyme :
 Nay, though you have the vision and the skill,
 You cannot draw the outline of a hill
 To please yourself, when you get home half-dead
 After the day's work—hammers in your head
 Still tapping, tapping. . . .

Always mad to draw
 The living shape of everything he saw,
 He'd had to spend his utmost skill and strength
 Learning a trade to live by, till at length
 Now he'd the leisure the old skill was dead.

Born for a painter as it seemed, instead
He'd spent his life upholstering furniture.
'Twas natural enough men should prefer
Upholstery to pictures, and their ease
To little coloured daubs of cows and trees.
He didn't blame them, 'twas no fault of theirs
That they saw life in terms of easy chairs,
And heaven, like that old sinner in the slush,
A glittering bar upholstered in red plush.

'Twas strange to look back on it now, his life—
His father married to a second wife,
And home no home for him since he could mind,
Save when the starry vision made him blind
To all about him, and he walked on air
For days together, and without a care . . .
But, as the years passed, seldomer they came,
Those starry dazzling nights and days aflame,
And oftener a sudden gloom would drop
Upon him, drudging all day in the shop
With his young brother John—John always gay,
Taking things as they came, the easy way,
Not minding overmuch if things went wrong
At home, and always humming a new song. . . .

And then she came into his life and shook
All heaven about him : he had but to look
On her to find the stars within his reach.
But, ere his love had trembled into speech,
He'd waked one day to know that not for him
Were those bright living eyes that turned dreams dim—
To know that, while he'd worshipped, John and she
Had taken to each other easily. . . .

But that was years ago . . . and now he sat
Beside his lonely hearth : and they were fat—
Ay, fat and old they were, John and his wife,
And with a grown-up family. Their life
Had not been over-easy : they'd their share
Of trouble, ay, more than enough to spare ;
But they had made the best of things and taken
Life as it came, with courage still unshaken.

They'd faced their luck, but never gone half-way
 To meet fresh trouble. Life was always gay
 For them between the showers : the roughest weather
 Might do its worst—they always stood together
 To bear the brunt, together stood their ground
 And came through smiling cheerfully. They'd found
 Marriage a hard-up happy business
 Of hand-to-mouth existence more or less,
 But, taking all in all, well worth their while
 To look on the bright side of things and smile
 When all went well, not fearing overmuch
 When life was suddenly brought to the touch
 And you'd to sink or swim. And they'd kept hold ;
 And even now, though they were fat and old,
 They'd still a hearty grip on life. . . .

They'd be

Sitting there in their kitchen after tea
 On either side the fireplace even now—
 Jane with her spectacles upon her brow,
 And nodding as she knitted, listening
 While John in shirt-sleeves scraped his fiddle-string,
 With one ear hearkening, lest a foot should stop
 And some rare customer invade the shop
 To ask the price of that old Flanders chest
 Or oaken ale-house settle. . . .

They'd the best

Of life maybe together . . .

And yet he—

Though he'd not taken life so easily,
 Had always hated makeshifts more or less,
 Grudging to swop the stars for sixpences,
 And was an old man now with that old thirst
 Unsatisfied—ay, even at the worst
 He'd had his compensations, now and then
 A starry glimpse, you couldn't work with men
 And quite forget the stars. Though life was spent
 In drudgery, it hadn't only meant
 Upholstering chairs in crimson plush for bars . . .
 Maybe it gave new meaning to the stars,
 The drudgery, who knows !

At least the rare

Wild glimpses he had caught at whiles were there

Yet living in his mind. When much was dim
And drudgery forgotten, bright for him
Burned even now in memory old delights
That had been his in other days and nights.
He'd always seen, though never could express
His eyes' delight—or only more or less :
But things once clearly seen, once and for all
The soul's possessions, naught that may befall
May ever dim, and neither moth nor rust
Corrupt the dream that, shedding mortal dust,
Has soared to life and spread its wings of gold
Within the soul. . . .

And yet, when they were told,
These deathless visions, little things they seemed,
Though something of the beauty he had dreamed
Burned in them, something of his youth's desire . . .

And, as he sat there gazing at the fire—
Once more he lingered, listening in the gloom
Of that great silent warehouse, in the room
Where stores were kept, one hand upon a shelf,
And heard a lassie singing to herself
Somewhere unseen without a thought who heard,
Just singing to herself like any bird
Because the heart was happy in her breast,
As happy as the day was long. At rest
He lingered, listening, and a ray of light
Streamed from the dormer-window up a height
Down on the bales of crimson cloth and lit
To sudden gold the dust that danced in it,
Till he was dazzled by the golden motes
That kept on dancing to those merry notes
Before his dreaming eyes, and danced as long
As he stood listening to the lassie's song. . . .

Then once again, his work-bag on his back,
He climbed that April morning up the track
That took you by a short cut through the wood
Up to the hilltop where the great house stood,
When suddenly beyond the firs' thick night
He saw a young fawn frisking in the light ;

Shaking the dewdrops in a silver rain
 From off his dappled hide, he leapt again
 As though he'd jump out of his skin with joy.
 With laughing eyes light-hearted as a boy,
 He watched the creature, unaware of him,
 Quivering with eager life in every limb,
 Leaping and frisking on the dewy green
 Beneath the flourish of the snowy gean,
 While every now and then the long ears pricked
 And budding horns as he leapt higher flicked
 The drooping clusters of wild-cherry bloom,
 Shaking their snow about him. From the gloom
 Of those dark wintry firs his eyes had won
 A sight of April sporting in the sun—
 Young April leaping to its heart's delight
 Among the dew beneath the boughs of white. . . .

And there'd been days among the hills, rare days
 And rarer nights among the heathery ways—
 Rare golden holidays when he had been
 Alone in the great solitude of green
 Wave-crested hills, a rolling, shoreless sea
 Flowing for ever through eternity—
 A sea of grasses, streaming without rest
 Beneath the great wind blowing from the west,
 Over which cloud-shadows sailed and swept away
 Beyond the world's edge all the summer day.

The hills had been his refuge, his delight,
 Seen or unseen, through many a day and night :
 His help was of the hills, steadfast, serene
 In their eternal strength, those shapes of green
 Sublimely moulded.

Whatsoever his skill,
 No man had ever rightly drawn a hill
 To his mind—never caught the subtle curves
 Of sweeping moorland with its dips and swerves—
 Nor ever painted heather. . . .

Heather came
 Always into his mind like sudden flame,
 Blazing and streaming over stony braes
 As he had seen it on that day of days

When he had plunged into a sea of bloom,
Blinded with colour, stifled with the fume
Of sun-soaked blossom, the hot heady scent
Of honey-breathing bells, and sunk content
Into a soft and scented bed to sleep ;
And he had lain in slumber sweet and deep,
And only wakened when the full moon's light
Had turned the wavy sea of heather white :
And still he'd lain within the full moon-blaze
Hour after hour, bewildered and adaze
As if enchanted—in a waking swoon
He'd lain within the full glare of the moon
Until she seemed to shine on him alone
In all the world, as though his body'd grown
Until it covered all the earth and he
Was swaying like the moon-enchanted sea
Beneath that cold white witchery of light. . . .
And now, the earth itself, he hung in night
Turning and turning in the cold white glare
For ever and for ever. . . .

She was there—
There at his window now, the moon. The sleet
And wind no longer swept the quiet street.
And he was cold : the fire had burned quite low ;
And while he'd dreamt there'd been a fall of snow.
He wondered where that poor old man would hide
His head to-night with thirst unsatisfied. . . .
His thirst, who knows !—but night may quench the thirst
Day leaves unsatisfied. . . .

Well, he must first
Get to his bed and sleep away the night
If he would rise to see the hills still white
In the first glory of the morning light.

NEIGHBOURS
(1920)
(including *WHIN*)

TO MICHAEL

*BRIEF songs of these distracted days
I dedicate to you
In whose clear undistracted gaze
Old Eden blooms anew*

*That, when beset by hopes and fears
Which life yet holds from you,
You'll think of me in after years
And find my singing true.*

ROBERT AND ELEANOR ASKEW

WHAT do you listen for ?

I hardly know,
Unless my heart is hearkening for the flow
Of Tarras Water singing by the door
Of Kirdlestead. I've never lived before
So far from running water in my life.
The quiet frightens me.

*The quiet, wife ?
You never heard the tramp of passing feet
Or rumble of wheels at Kirdlestead. This street
Is quiet enough, but surely Kirdlestead
Was quieter ?*

I've never lain in bed
Without the voice of water calling clear,
Save when the west wind drowned it, in my ear ;
And now I cannot sleep : the darkness lies
Heavily as a dead-weight on my eyes,
As though I lay deep-buried underground
With ears that strained to catch the faintest sound
Of wind in grass or water over stones :
The silence steals like ice into my bones
And numbs my body, freezing blood and breath
Till my heart flutters in the clutch of death.

*And you can talk of death, a new-made bride,
Lying the first night by your husband's side ?*

The husband that my father pledged me to
With his last dying breath ! The dead and you
Have held me to my troth : and I'm the wife
Of my dead father's faithful friend for life—
For life that now I know can never be
The song that Tarras Water sang to me.

CELIA AND SYLVIA WARDEN

WHAT is that tapping? There it is again!

A spray of roses blown against the pane—
Thorns scratching and a softly-thudding bloom.

*It's strange, as we mope here in this prim room,
Yawning for bedtime in the cold lamplight,
To think of roses blowing in the night,
And just that thin glass shutting them outside.
Oh, how I long to fling the window wide!*

Roses and thorns!

*Ay, thorns too, if need be!
Rather than hear them tap incessantly
The cold glass that shuts in my heart, I'd bare
My bosom for the sharpest thorns to tear.*

JOHN AND MARGARET NETHERTON

WHY do you strike a match?

I want to see

What time it is, wife.

It is nearly three.

How do you know that, wife, without a light?

I know.

You know? Well, sure enough, you're right.
I cannot think . . .

You don't remember, then?

Remember, wife?

*The memories of men!
But, husband, as it seems you don't recall,
What makes you want to know the time at all?*

I couldn't say, wife; but I cannot get
A wink of sleep—as if my eyes were set

On something that they cannot see quite clear :
 My thoughts keep fumbling something very near
 That yet eludes them always ; and just now
 I felt that, rest or no rest, anyhow
 I must know what o'clock it was. But you—
 I cannot think, wife, how it was you knew
 Almost the very moment . . .

'Twas nigh three,
*A year ago, that he smiled up at me ;
 And as within my arms he lay so still
 I felt his body stiffen and grow chill
 Against my bosom : and how should my breast
 Forget the moment when his heart found rest ?*

OLIVER AND URSULA REED

*It's useless, wife, to turn it up—the oil
 Is done, and you'll just char the wick.*

The toil
 Lamps take to keep them going ! It's not long
 Since last I filled it. Surely something's wrong
 With a lamp that burns so quickly.

*Ay, the light
 We thought would burn a lifetime, in one night
 Consumed its fuel in a wild flare, and we
 Are left a charred wick smouldering smokily
 To work by, till at last, a dull red spark,
 It shall wink out and leave us in the dark.*

BARBARA FELL

STEPHEN, wake up ! There's some one at the gate.
 Quick, to the window . . . Oh, you'll be too late !
 I hear the front door opening quietly.
 Did you forget last night to turn the key ?
 A foot is on the stairs—nay, just outside
 The very room—the door is opening wide . . .

Stephen, wake up, wake up ! Who's there ? Who's there ?
I only feel a cold wind in my hair . . .
Have I been dreaming, Stephen ? Husband, wake
And comfort me : I think my heart will break.
I never knew you sleep so sound and still . . .
O my heart's love, why is your hand so chill ?

KATHERINE WEIR

THOUGH I have been a none-too-happy wife,
And now my children grow away from me,
Bringing to old age fresh anxiety,
I have been used—and to be used by life,
Even ill-used and broken utterly,
With every faith betrayed and trust abused,
Is a kinder lot than in security
To crumble coldly to the grave unused.

ESTHER MILBURN

ONCE realised, what else was left to do
But part and go our separate ways anew ?
I've not set eyes upon him since that night.
Why did we marry ? Why did that paper light
I held the match to ? Yes, it's gone black out,
Leaving the sticks unkindled, and no doubt
The fire must be relaid before 'twill burn.
But when love fails there is no second turn :
If once the paper doesn't fire the wood,
Or the blazing wood the coal, there's little good
In striking matches to eternity ;
They only spurt and flicker mockingly,
Scorching the fingers, to illuminate
Charred litter in the cold bars of the grate.

PHILIP AND PHOEBE WARE

WHO is that woman, Philip, standing there
Before the mirror doing up her hair ?

*You're dreaming, Phoebe, or the morning light
Mixing and mingling with the dying light
Makes shapes out of the darkness, and you see
Some dream-remembered phantasy maybe.*

Yet it grows clearer with the growing day,
And in the cold dawnlight her hair is grey ;
Her lifted arms are naught but bone ; her hands
Are lean as claws, and fumble as she stands
Trying to pin a wisp into its place.
O Philip, I must look upon her face
There in the mirror ! Nay, but I will rise
And peep over her shoulder. . . . Oh, the eyes
That burn out from the face of skin and bone,
Searching my very marrow, are my own !

ANDREW AND ANN FEATHERSTONE

WHAT are you thinking of so seriously ?

My birthday, Ann.

Your birthday ? Mercy me,
I'd quite forgotten that it falls to-day !

*What matter, wife ? Birthdays as one grows grey
Are scarce the anniversaries of joy
They once were.*

I can't picture you a boy.
Your hair's no greyer now than when we met
The first time, just a year ago ; and yet
You did not think yourself too grey to wed
A girl just fresh from school.

*And her gold head
Seemingly didn't think itself too young
To marry grizzled locks ?*

A golden tongue

Had more to do with it than silver hairs.
But you, you came upon me unawares
Before I'd realised what life might be,
Before I knew what it might mean to me,
Though you were old enough to be more wise . . .

*Yet not too old to be dazzled by your eyes !
My heart was young enough . . .*

At fifty-nine !

*Ay, and still loves to see your blue eyes shine,
Even though anger fire them.*

Then it's true
Years count for naught. I'm older far than you.
Your heart's a boy's heart still ; but mine's as old
As any woman's heart whose tale is told.
Though you were forty years of age, a man
Half-way through life, before my life began,
I have outstripped you in a single year,
And have naught left to hope for or to fear.

REBECCA NIXON AND MARTHA WAUGH

*If your clock's going at all, it must be slow.
Surely it's stopped ?*

It stopped a week ago.

A week ago—and you have let it stand ?

I hadn't the heart to wind it up. No hand
But Ben's has turned the key, since he himself
Put the clock there upon the mantelshelf
The day that we came home for the first time
To set up house together ; and its chime
Had never failed to sound an hour since then,
Unless he had it down to clean ; for Ben
Was handy and could always overhaul
A clock, though it was not his trade at all,

As well as any watchmaker. His heart
 Doted on wheels : he'd handle every part
 So daintily that you would never guess
 His job was hewing coal. I must confess
 Wheels always daunted me ; but Ben's brain went
 By clockwork, and his happiest hours were spent
 Sorting old clocks and trying to make them go.
 And that one's never been a second slow
 In all these years, or half a second fast,
 Or failed to strike . . . until Ben breathed his last
 On Monday morn before the stroke of three . . .
 Though all the town's clocks hammered presently
 As if they struck my heart. Ben always wound
 That clock each Sunday, but when the last came round
 He'd been in bed a week, and his poor mind
 Was wandering—though his fingers tried to wind
 Some ghostly clock that troubled him all night—
 And when I stole downstairs and struck a light
 I missed the tick ; and with a still white face
 Ben's clock was standing silent in its place,
 With motionless hands upon the stroke of three.
 Its heart had stopped when Ben's stopped. As for me,
 I'll never wind it up again : I know,
 Even if I cared, no touch could make it go
 But Ben's ; and those still hands will always keep
 My heart in mind . . .

Nay, Martha, you need sleep.
You mustn't brood like this. Try to forget.
Come, let me wind it up for you and set
The old clock going. Only think how Ben
Would hate to have it standing !

Wind it, then.

Ben hated a stopped clock ; and now he's gone
 It seems I've got to keep things going on.

WILLIAM AND AGNES PRINGLE

YOU'VE locked the doors and sneaked the windows tight ?

I've locked up as I've locked up every night
Since father crept that last time painfully

*Upstairs and left the locking-up to me—
 Since for the last time father went to bed
 To rise no more. To think that he's been dead
 Just twenty years—ay, to the very hour !
 The clock was striking in the Abbey tower
 When he sat up. " Are all the windows fast ? "*
*He whispered, then dropped back and breathed his last.
 To think I'd nigh forgotten !*

Ay, to-day

Your thoughts have all been turned a different way.

True, lass, and yet it's queer I should forget.

Queer that a bridegroom's thoughts should not be set
 On death ?

*Nay, queer I didn't choose instead
 A different day in all the year to wed.*

Ay—but you've not forgotten to secure
 The doors and windows : so you may feel sure,
 While such important things you think of still,
 Your mind's not getting over-flighty, Will.
 But you must never let a hare-brained wife
 Divert you from the habits of a life.
 Yet there's just one thing, Will, that puzzles me :
 What is it you lock out so carefully—
 That you've locked out each night these twenty years,
 And your old father with his anxious fears
 Locked out before you, and his father too
 As likely as not before him ? Why should you
 Secure yourself against the harmless night ?

*I never looked upon it in that light—
 But it's the custom. . . .*

What is it that you dread
 Will come upon you as you lie in bed
 If you should leave a window or a door
 Unfastened ?

Well, I hardly know, I'm sure.

No bolt or bar has ever locked out death ;
 So your old father might have spared his breath.

Or is it, rather, something you lock in
Each night lest thieves . . .

*There's naught for thieves to win—
Though I had left the doors and windows wide
These many years . . .*

But then you'd no young bride.
And now I wonder if you know aright
Or realise what you lock in to-night ?

NICHOLAS HALL

WELL, who are you ? And how did you come there ?
I must have nodded, drowsing in my chair,
Although I could have sworn I hadn't slept
Or even winked an eyelid, but had kept
My eyes set steadily upon the glow,
Dreaming of fires burned out so long ago—
Ay, long ago ! But you, when did you come ?
Why do you stand there smiling, keeping mum ?
I felt no draught blow from the opening door,
And heard no footsteps on the sanded floor.
Why don't you speak, young man ?—for you are young—
That much I see, and surely you've a tongue ?
And young men should be civil to old men.
What, you won't answer ? Please to leave me, then,
To my own hearthside—please to go away.
You'll be an old man too yourself some day ;
And you'll be sorry then, you will, my son,
To think you stood there grinning, making fun
Of an old man's afflictions, an old man
Who once was young too when the red blood ran . . .
But who you are I can't make out at all.
Why do you cast no shadow on the wall
When the high chair you lean upon throws back
A shadow on the whitewash sharp and black ?
There's something half-familiar, now the flame
Lights up your face—something that when you came
Was passing through my mind . . . I can't recall . . .
Ah God, what's happening to Nicholas Hall
When he can see his young self standing there
Mocking his old self huddled in a chair ?

MERRY EYE

ON the day ere I was born
Underneath the ragged thorn
Three old women hobbled by.

One, she had an empty sack,
One, she had a humpy back,
One, she had a merry eye.

So the day that I was born
Underneath the ragged thorn,
As I lay upon the sack
With my little humpy back
I was christened Merry Eye.

BLIND BELL

LIKE a wind-writhen ash
On a rime-grizzled moor,
Corpse-cold in the shade
Beside the church-door

She stood with a grin
As we trod, newly wed,
The slimy green path
By the mounds of the dead.

As her blank eyes bleared out
From her pocked yellow face
Like a moon on the wane,
We slackened our pace :

As her cruel blind eyes
Peered into each heart,
We faltered and trailed
Unlinked and apart,

Till, estranged and corpse-cold,
We stood at our door,
Each lone as an ash
On a rime-grizzled moor.

ELLEN CHESTER

AFTER working all day at the tan-pits,
With strong hands tanned horny and hard
And stained with the bark brown as leather,
He would come every day from the yard ;

And I, from my work at the laundry,
With hands soused in suds clean and white
And soft to the touch as old linen,
Would meet him half-way every night :

Would meet him half-way every evening,
Though always I shuddered to feel
Those hard fingers gripping my fingers
And crushing my soft hands like steel.

But now I'm forgot and forsaken ;
And eagerly waiting he stands
For a girl coming home from the gardens
With weathered and grubby red hands.

As unseen in the dark of a doorway
I watch him alone and apart,
My cold fingers fumble my bosom
To loosen his clutch from my heart.

RICHARD KENDAL

I COULD not sleep for aching cold ;
And as I turned and tossed
I muttered : *This sharp spell will mean
Money and labour lost :*

*My currant-bushes, newly bought,
Will all be killed by frost.*

*The bushes I've saved up to buy,
And with back-breaking toil
Have set with roots spread carefully
In the well-watered soil,
Are just an acre of innocents
For early frost to spoil.*

Though every bush survived the cold
To pay me royally,
The breaking of the morrow's morn
Brought bitter news to me,
For in the night my oldest friend
Had perished, drowned at sea.

In drowning darkness, icy-chill,
My oldest friend was lost :
Yet never once I'd thought of him
As fretfully I tossed,
Concerned lest my new currant-trees
Should suffer from the frost.

BETTY RIDDLE

As she sits at her stall in the Martinmas Fair,
With a patched blue umbrella slung over her chair,
Old Betty Riddle sells
Greenjacks and jargonels,
Fixing some ghost of old days with her stare.

A ha'p'orth of greenjacks ! each little boy cries,
Devouring six-penn'orth at least with his eyes :
Into his grubby hands
Pears drop as still he stands ;
But she gives him no glance as he munches his prize.

While mumbling and mowing she sits all the day,
And her mellow green pyramids dwindle away,

Folk in the roundabout
Racket and skirl and shout ;
Yet never a word to it all does she say.

And even if, when her whole stock-in-trade's bought,
Some laughing lad's eye by that cold stare is caught,
Glumly away he'll slink,
Too dull of wit to think
Of offering a penny to her for her thought.

And soon they forget her, the lads without sense ;
Yet the thought that is burning that blue and intense
Past-piercing steely eye,
Blind to the passer-by,
Must be worth a deal more than the pears and the pence.

Still staring she sits as the slow hours chime
Till the raw fog has covered her bare boards with rime—
Crazy old wife who sells
Greenjacks and jargonels—
Having buried three husbands in all in her time.

BESSIE STOKOE

HE stood with the other young herds
At the Hiring to-day :
And I laughed and I chaffed and changed words
With every young hind of them all
As I stopped by the lollipop stall,
But never a word did he say.

He had straggly long straw-coloured hair
And a beard like a goat—
In his breeches a badly-stitched tear
That I longed, standing there in the crush,
To re-mend, as I hankered to brush
The ruddle and fluff from his coat.

But his bonnie blue eyes staring wide
Looked far beyond me,
As though on some distant fellside
His dogs were collecting the sheep,
And he anxiously watched them to keep
A young dog from running too free—

And I almost expected to hear
From the lips of the lad
A shrill whistle sing in my ear,
As he eyed that green hillside, to check
The fussy black frolicking speck
From chasing the grey specks like mad. . . .

So I left them and went on my way
With a lad with black hair ;
And we swung and rode round all the day
To the racket of corncrake and gong ;
But I never forgot in the throng
The lad with the far-away stare.

The jimmy-smart groom at my side
Had twinkling black eyes ;
But the grin on his mouth was too wide,
And his hands with my hands were too free ;
So I took care to slip him at tea
As he turned round to pay for the pies :

And I left him alone on the seat
With the teapot and cups,
And the two pies he'd paid for to eat.
If he happens to think of the cause,
It may teach him to keep his red paws
For the handling of horses and pups.

But alone in the rain and the dark,
As I made for the farm,
I halted a moment to hark
To the sound of a shepherd's long stride,
And the shy lad stepped up to my side
And I felt his arm link through my arm.

So it seems after all I'm to mend
Those breeches, and keep
That shaggy head clipped to the end,
And the shaggy chin clean, and to give
That coat a good brush—and to live
All my days in the odour of sheep.

AGATHA TODD

YOUNG lads tramping, fifes and drums—
Down the street the hubbub comes ;

And the drum-sticks drub again
On my stretched and aching brain,

While the screeching of the fife
Just goes through me like a knife.

Yet I thought the music gay
When Dick Lishman marched away,

And I laughed ; for what was he
But a lad who bothered me—

But a man of many men
I had little need of then ?

Now I know that if the fife
Cut my heart-strings like a knife,

Rattling drum-sticks, rub-a-dub,
On my coffin-lid would drub,

And my heart would never rest
In the hollow of my breast,

But would always start and beat
To the tramping of dead feet.

HIGH CUP NICK

DARK are the black peat-hags that lie
'Twixt Cauldron Snout and High Cup Nick,
But darker is the pit that gapes
Between the dead man and the quick.

I struck his trail at Cauldron Snout ;
He rose and bolted as I came,
And as he scrambled up the brae
I saw that he was running lame.

He hirpled like a wounded hare
O'er craggy bent and quaking moss,
But, cold with anger, on his heel
I followed steadily across

Until I came to High Cup Nick
And, looking down, I saw him there,
Just lying like a tumbled bairn
With bloody stains upon his hair.

No death may ever pay the price
Of the black thing he did to me,
Yet, tumbled in the bracken bed,
He was so pitiful to see.

Dark are the black peat-hags that lie
'Twixt Cauldron Snout and High Cup Nick,
But darker is the pit that gapes
Between the dead man and the quick.

RALPH LILBURN

THE night we took the bees out to the heather,
The sealed hives stacked behind us, as together
We rode in the jingly jolting cart, were humming
Like the far-murmuring rumour of blown branches.

White in the moon-flame was the flowering heather,
And white the sandy trackway as together
We travelled, and a dewy scent of honey
Hung in the warm, white, windless air of midnight.

A silvery trackway through moon-silvered heather,
To the humming dark of the hives we'll ride together
For evermore through murmurous dewy midnight,
My heart a hive of honey-scented moonlight.

THE RAGGED STONE

AS I was walking with my dear, my dear come back at last,
The shadow of the Ragged Stone fell on us as we passed :

And if the tale be true they tell about the Ragged Stone,
I'll not be walking with my dear next year, nor yet alone.

And we're to wed come Michaelmas, my lovely dear and I ;
And we're to have a little house, and do not want to die.

But all the folk are fighting in the lands across the sea
Because the king and counsellors went mad in Germany.

Because the king and counsellors went mad, my love and I
May never have a little house before we come to die.

And if the tale be true they tell about the Ragged Stone,
I'll not be walking with my dear next year, nor yet alone.

OLIVER GARTH

COLD as mushrooms are her hands,
Cold and white,
As she awaits me in the night
Where Saint Michael's steeple stands.

Cold as mushrooms are her lips
 In the dew,
 Kissing mine beneath the yew
 As within my arm she slips.

And I learn naught from her cold
 Lightless eyes
 Of her day-dreams as she lies
 Underneath the heavy mould.

Once her hands were brown as mine
 When we stood
 In the little rowan-wood
 By the waters of the Tyne,

And her parted lips were bright
 And as red
 As the berries overhead
 In the still October light.

And I promised I'd be true
 To her there . . .
 And the rowan trees are bare . . .
 And we meet beneath the yew.

SKIRLNAKED

O CAME you by Skirlnaked
 As you came o'er the moor ?
 And did you see an old man
 Standing at the door—
 And did you see an old man
 Glowering at the door ?

O came you by Skirlnaked
 As you came o'er the moor ?
 And did you hear a young bride weep
 Behind the fast-shut door ?
 And did you hear a young bride greet
 Behind the fast-shut door ?

THE CROWDER

'TWIXT Coldmouth Hill and Butterstone Shank
 I met an old crowder grizzled and lank
 With his kit tucked under his arm,
 And I called to him—*Crowder, whither away ?*
 And he answered—*I'm due upon Michaelmas Day*
To fiddle at Cherrytree's Farm—
For I play "Bobbie Shafto" and "Stagshaw Bank Fair",
"The Waters of Tyne", "Elsie Marley",
"Chevy Chase" and "The Keel Row" and "Dick o' the Cow",
And "Over the Water to Charlie !"

And I called to him—*Crowder, come fiddle away !*
For it's wellnigh a week until Michaelmas Day,
And I'll dance till you've crick in your arm—
A crick in your arm and a crick in your back,
And your fiddle-strings snap and your fiddle-bridge crack—
Then heigh-ho ! for Cherrytree's Farm—
For I dance "Bobbie Shafto" and "Stagshaw Bank Fair",
"The Waters of Tyne", "Elsie Marley",
"Chevy Chase" and "The Keel Row" and "Dick o' the Cow",
And "Over the Water to Charlie !"

And he up with his kit and he fiddled away,
 And I danced to his fiddling till Michaelmas Day—
 And never a crick in his arm !
 Then he held out his hat, and the devil to pay,
 As I sat in the ditch and he wished me *Good-day !*
 And hurried to Cherrytree's Farm
 To play "*Bobbie Shafto*" and "*Stagshaw Bank Fair*",
 "*The Waters of Tyne*", "*Elsie Marley*",
 "*Chevy Chase*" and "*The Keel Row*" and "*Dick o' the Cow*",
 And "*Over the Water to Charlie !*"

HENRY TURNBULL

HE planked down sixpence and he took his drink ;
 Then slowly picked the change up from the zinc,
 And in his breeches-pocket buttoned tight
 Two greasy pennies, which that very night

Were used by Betty Catchieside, called in
 To lay him out, when she'd tied up his chin,
 To keep his eyelids shut : and so he lies
 With tuppence change till Doomsday on his eyes.

SAM HOGARTH

HE sits—his open Bible on his knee,
 Nell, his old whippet, curled up at his feet—
 Muttering at whiles and nodding drowsily
 Over the damped slack-fire that dully burns
 In the little grate : then shifting in his seat
 He lifts the book with shaky hands, his head
 Wagging with eagerness, and, fumbling, turns
 From the tenth chapter of Genesis, unread,
 To the well-thumbed flyleaf at the back, to pore
 With spectacled, weak, reverent eyes once more,
 Lest it escape his failing memory,
 On Nell's proud scrawl-recorded pedigree.

JAUNTY JACK

HE'D run like a cat on the ridge of the roof,
 And then to give proof
 Of his daredevil humour would stumble and slip
 Down the slant of the slates and over the side—
 While agape we would fear for the end of his slide—
 But just as he seemed to shoot over the edge
 His fingers would grip
 The lip of the gutter or maybe the ledge
 Of a top-storey window ; and so he'd hang there
 Cock-a-doodling and kicking his heels in the air.

And then he'd swing on to the ladder and pant
 Up the slippery slant,
 And take up his trowel and hawk of wet lime,
 Going quietly on with the work he was at
 With the same solemn face and sly rake of the hat,

As though he had worked without stopping to wink
The whole of the time,
So sober and smug that a newcomer'd think
That never a notion at all he had got
That wasn't concerned with the new chimney-pot.

And no one could guess he was wedded for life
To a slut of a wife,
And had five gaping lasses and five gaping boys
To feed and to clothe and to keep in shoe-leather,
And to scrub every Saturday night all together
At the scullery-tap with a splash-dash and squall
And the hell of a noise.
Then one dark winter morning his pride had a fall—
Tripped over his shadow, and headlong downstairs,
And ended his jests and his lardy-da airs.

MICHAEL DODD

WHEN the folding-star had kindled
In the embers of the west,
And the happy day was over,
Quietly we sank to rest,

Thinking we should sleep till daybreak ;
But we wakened all too soon,
As above the ridge of Hareshaw
Stole the cold white witches' moon—

Stole the icy moon and held us
Tranced as we with numb surprise
Saw the cold estranging glitter
Of each other's alien eyes.

THE KIELDER STONE

THREE times round the Kielder Stone
Widdershins I walked alone—
And his little son was born
Lifeless on the morrow's morn.

Three times round the Kielder Stone,
Widdershins I walked alone—
And his gipsy bride fell dead
Rising from her bearing-bed.

Three times round the Kielder Stone
Widdershins I walked alone—
And he wanders night and day
Witless over bent and brae.

Round and round the Kielder Stone
With the sun I walk alone :
But God never made the sun
Can undo what I have done.

OLD SKINFLINT

'TWIXT Carrowbrough Edge and Settlingstones
See old daddy Skinflint dance in his bones,
Old Skinflint on the gallows-tree,
Old daddy Skinflint, the father of me.

*Why do you dance, do you dance so high ?
Why do you dance in the windy sky ?
Why do you dance in your naked bones
'Twixt Carrowbrough Edge and Settlingstones ?*

*Old daddy Skinflint, the father of me,
Why do you dance on the gallows-tree,
Who never tripped on a dancing-floor
Or flung your heels in a reel before ?*

*You taught me many a cunning thing,
But never taught me to dance and sing ;
Yet I must do whatever you do,
So when you dance I must dance too.*

'Twixt Carrowbrough Edge and Settlingstones
See old daddy Skinflint dance in his bones,
Old Skinflint on the gallows-tree,
Old daddy Skinflint, the father of me.

MARTHA CAFFREY

IT must have been his name that stirred
My mind from slumber none too deep
As, waking in the night, I heard
My sister talking in her sleep.

I could not catch what else she said
As I lay there with heart aflame,
Thinking about the newly-dead,
Wondering why she should breathe his name—

Why she should dream of him who lay
Scarce colder in the grave than he
Since our unlucky wedding-day
Had ever shown himself to me.

UNTHANK

THE sheep are bleating in the rain
That drives across Lune Moor,
And he will never come again
At eve to Unthank door.

Though I was naught to him, kind sleep
Comes rare and scant to me
Since he has left the bleating sheep
And gone across the sea.

They took him from the sheep, and gave
A gun into his hands ;
And he has gone to seek a grave
In far-off foreign lands.

I wonder if he ever hears
Out there the bleat of sheep,
Or if with cold death in his ears
He sleeps too sound and deep.

I wonder if he hears the rain
 That drives so drearily—
 That drives across Lune Moor again
 And through the heart of me.

OLD MEG

THERE'S never the taste of a cherry for me,
 They're out of my reach on the bough,
 And it's hard to be seeing them hang on the tree—
 And no man to hand me them now.

It's hard to be travelling since Billy Boy died,
 With the devil's own crick in my back,
 With the gout in my knees and a stitch in my side—
 And no man to carry my pack.

It's hard to be travelling the roads all alone
 When cherries hang handy and ripe—
 And no man to find me a soft mossy stone,
 And no man to light me my pipe.

PITY ME

As I came down by Pity Me,
 Pity Me, Pity Me,
 As I came down by Pity Me
 I heard a lassie sing—
*I'd give the very heart of me
 To have a golden ring.*

As I came down by Pity Me,
 Pity Me, Pity Me,
 As I came down by Pity Me
 I heard a grey wife sing—
*I'd give the very heart of me
 To lose a golden ring.*

MARGARET DEAN

WHEN we broke in the lamp was burning still
 With clear and steady light,
 Although the noonday blazed on heath and hill,
 But in her eyes was night.

Their flame, that had outbraved the stress and care
 Of hope and fear and doubt,
 In the long quiet of the last despair
 Had gently flickered out.

HAGGIE KNOWE

BY Raven Burn and Carlin Tooth
 She came at last to Hartshorn Pike,
 Then, turning east to Haggie Knowe,
 She rested in a rushy syke—

She rested in a rushy syke
 And laid her baby in the fern ;
 And low and sad the song she sang
 Beside the tumbling burn.

*Lie still, my sorrow, by the burn—
 For no man ever spoke the truth
 If he were lying when we came
 That day by Carlin Tooth.*

*From Raven Burn to Carlin Tooth
 He swore that he'd be true to me—
 And sure he's lying dead in France
 Or under the deep sea.*

*He's lying under the deep sea
 Who lay all night upon my breast ;
 Your father's lying cold and still—
 Lie still, my grief, and rest*

PHOEBE ELLIS

THE little bell still sounds as loud and clear
 As when she rang it, standing at the door ;
 And still the happy children when they hear
 Run in from play, though she will ring no more.

But whether they remember, as they storm
 The threshold, who once rang it, none can tell,
 Or if for them each night a ghostly form
 From some dim threshold tinkles a ghostly bell.

PEDLER JACK

I CAME by Raw from Hungry Law,
 When who should pass me by
 But Pedler Jack with a pack on his back
 And a patch across his eye.

I came by Raw from Hungry Law
 And heard the pedler cry—
*I've got in my pack the thing you lack—
 The " Song of a Sparkling Eye ".*

*O Pedler Jack with the pack on your back,
 Since Sally and I did part
 I've saved up farthings four to buy
 " The Song of a Broken Heart ! "*

If you want " The Song of a Broken Heart "
You go elsewhere to buy ;
*For I have never a song in my pack
 But the " Song of a Sparkling Eye ".*

*O what know I of a sparkling eye
 Since Sally and I did part ?
 —And what should Jack the pedler know
 Of " The Song of a Broken Heart " ?*

I came by Raw from Hungry Law,
When who should pass me by
But Pedler Jack with a pack on his back
And a patch across his eye.

SCALD HILL CAIRN

WITH the heart and the heels of a hunted hare
He took the track by Foulbarn Gair
And over Coldburn Hill,
With many a twist and many a turn
Through the rimy bent and the bracken-fern—
But they followed him, followed him still.

With many a twist and many a turn
He scrambled down to the Lambden Burn
And up the Bellyside Hill.
He dropped his knife as he climbed the brae,
He dropped his gully, but could not stay,
For they followed him, followed him still.

He dropped his knife as he climbed the brae,
He dropped his gully, but could not stay,
For now at the foot of the hill
The dead man's sons were hot on his track,
So hard on his track he couldn't turn back,
For they followed him, followed him still.

The dead man's sons were hot on his track,
So hard on his track he dare not turn back
To meet them on the hill :
He dropped the poke with the old man's hoard
And made a bolt for Langleeford—
But they followed him, followed him still.

They did not stay for the old man's hoard,
And never he came to Langleeford,
For they took him upon Scald Hill—
They took him at last . . . And a cairn of stones
Lies hard and heavy upon his bones,
But his ghost it is running still—

With the heart and the heels of a hunted hare
 It takes the track by Foulbarn Gair
 And over Coldburn Hill,
 With many a twist and many a turn
 Through the rimy bent and the bracken-fern,
 And they follow him, follow him still.

BLAWEARY

As I came by Blawearly
 I heard a young wife sing—
Hush-a-low, hush-a-low,
Hush-a-low my dearie,
Hush-a-low my little lamb,
Hush-a-low and sleep.

As I came by Blawearly
 I heard a young wife sing—
Hush-a-low, hush-a-low,
Hush-a-low my dearie,
Daddy's in the lambing-storm
'Tending to the sheep.

As I came by Blawearly
 I heard a young wife sing—
Hush-a-low, hush-a-low
Hush-a-low my dearie,
Daddy's coming home again
To find his lamb asleep.

ELLEN CHANDLER

As drowsily she lay in bed
 And watched the sunlight dance and quiver
 On the slant ceiling overhead,
 And hearkened to the singing river,
 She wondered who last watched the light
 From off the singing water glancing,
 On the low ceiling's curded white
 In golden rings and eddies dancing.

And, even as she wondered, heard
A voice between a sigh and shiver,
Though nothing in the chamber stirred—
Where comes no sound of singing river
I lie, who lay where you lie now,
Daughter, and watched that golden glancing—
Cold darkness heavy on my brow,
And done the dazzle and the dancing.

WITCH'S LINN

WE lay all night in Witch's Linn
Beside the Lewis Burn,
And heard the whispering of the wind
Among the withered fern.

We lay all night in Witch's Linn
Beneath the staring stars,
And the yellow horn of the old moon hung
Beyond the naked scars.

We lay all night in Witch's Linn
Till morn broke bleak and grey—
O that my heart had ceased to beat
Before the blink of day !

For evermore in Witch's Linn
I hear the Lewis Burn,
And the whispering, whispering, whispering wind
Among the withered fern.

JANE BATHGATE

SHE never even stops to think
What she is doing here—
But scrubs potatoes at the sink
Or fetches William's beer,

Or baths their six young bairns and mends
Their clothes with weary eyes
Throughout a day that barely ends
Before it's time to rise :

And she'll be much too tired to heed
In the grave's secure retreat,
When there's no longer any need
Of making both ends meet.

SUNDAYSIGHT

By Seven Pikes to Blackmoor Skirt
And so to Sundaysight
Is a rough road for travelling
For him who walks by night.

In rain or snow for seven years
Each night he took the track
That he might see a window-light,
And ere the dawn walked back.

By moon or stars to Sundaysight
He came to ease his mind
In gazing on a glowing pane
And the shadow on the blind.

He never spoke to her by day,
Who could not be his wife,
And naught she ever knew of him
Who loved her more than life.

'Twixt Sundaysight and Seven Pikes
A man may come to hurt ;
And with a broken neck he lay
One dawn on Blackmoor Skirt.

By Seven Pikes to Blackmoor Skirt
And so to Sundaysight
Is a rough road for travelling,
But ghosts can travel light.

ANTHONY EARNSHAW

WE found him sleeping in the drifted snow
Beside his buried but still breathing ewes.
'Tis rarely granted any man to know
And find unsought the death that he would choose ;
Yet he who'd always laboured among sheep
Since he could walk, and who had often said
That death should find him working, stumbled dead
Succouring his flock, and by them fell asleep.

Spare sinewy body with brown knotted hands,
Lean weathered face and eyes that burned so clear
From gazing ever through the winds that blow
Over wide grassy spaces, one who stands
Beside you, quiet on your hurdle-bier,
Envies your hard-earned death amid the snow.

CHAMBERS

CHAMBERS

THE labyrinthine corridors of my mind
Between dead, lightless, many-chambered walls
In endless mazes of confusion wind ;
And only now and again a live ray falls,
Touching the secret spring of some hid door
With magic, and flings open some unknown
Chamber of light wherein there dwells alone
Beauty and terror never glimpsed before.

Could but that ray through all the chambers glow
Once and for ever till my mind should burn
One sun-like sphere of still celestial light !
But only rarely, opening out of turn,
Two neighbouring doors spring wide at once and show
Beauty and terror together in the night.

DRIFTWOOD

BLACK spars of driftwood burn to peacock flames,
Sea-emeralds and sea-purples and sea-blues,
And all the innumerable ever-changing hues,
That haunt the changeless deeps but have no names,
Flicker and spire in our enchanted sight ;
And as we gaze, the unsearchable mystery,
The unfathomed cold salt magic of the sea,
Shines clear before us in the quiet night.

We know the secret that Ulysses sought,
That moonstruck mariners since time began
Snatched at a drowning hazard—strangely brought
To our home-keeping hearts in drifting spars
We chanced to kindle under the cold stars—
The secret of the ocean-heart of man.

THE PAISLEY SHAWL

WHAT were his dreams who wove this coloured shawl—
The grey hard-bitten weaver gaunt and dour
Out of whose grizzled memory, even as a flower
Out of bleak winter at young April's call
In the old tradition of flowers breaks into bloom,
Blossomed the ancient intricate design
Of softly-glowing hues and exquisite line—
What were his dreams, crouched at his cottage-loom ?

What were her dreams, the laughing April lass,
Who first, in the flowering of young delight
With parted lips and eager tilted head
And shining eyes, about her shoulders white
Drew the soft fabric of kindling green and red,
Before her candle-lighted looking-glass ?

1916

THE reek of boiling cutch : against the sky
Wet dripping amber of the new-dipped sails
Hung on the crag-top in the sun to dry,
Flapping against the tarry glistening rails
In a wind that brings a tang of burning kelp :
A sleek black cormorant on a scar rose-red
Washed by unfoaming emerald ; and the yelp
Of gulls that wheel unwavering overhead—

Clear colours, searching odours, and keen cries
Sting all my eager senses to fresh life
With tingling ears and nostrils and smarting eyes :
Yet even now in sick unending strife
In a wide slimy welter oversea
Men spill each other's blood indifferently.

TROOPSHIP : MID-ATLANTIC

(s.s. *Baltic*, JULY 1917)

DARK waters into crystalline brilliance break
About the keel as, through the moonless night,
The dark ship moves in its own moving lake
Of phosphorescent cold moon-coloured light ;
And to the clear horizon all around
Drift pools of fiery beryl flashing bright,
As though unquenchably burning cold and white
A million moons in the night of waters drowned.

And staring at the magic with eyes adream
That never till now have looked upon the sea,
Boys from the Middle West lounge listlessly
In the unlanthorned darkness, boys who go,
Beckoned by some unchallengeable dream,
To unknown lands to fight an unknown foe.

HANDS

TEMPEST without : within, the mellow glow
Of mingling lamp and firelight over all—
Etchings and water-colours on the wall,
Cushions and curtains of clear indigo,
Rugs damask-red and blue as Tyrian seas,
Deep chairs, black oaken settles, hammered brass,
Translucent porcelain and sea-green glass—
Colour and warmth and light and dreamy ease :

And I sit wondering where are now the hands
That wrought at anvil, easel, wheel, and loom—
Hands slender, swart, red, gnarled—in foreign lands
Or English shops to furnish this seemly room ;
And all the while without the windy rain
Drums like dead fingers tapping at the pane.

LINDISFARNE

JET-BLACK the crags of False Emmanuel Head
Against the winter sunset : standing stark
Within the shorn sun's frosty glare, night-dark,
A solitary monk with arms outspread
In worship or in frustrate tense desire
Of racked and tortured flesh : still young and spare,
With drooping head he seems to hang in air
Crucified on a wheel of blood-red fire.

The red sun dips, and slowly to his side
His slack arms fall, and in the clear green light
Of the frosty afterglow where coldly burns
A lonely star, a very pillar of night
He stands above the steely shivering tide,
Then slowly to the darkening east he turns.

DUNSTANBOROUGH

OVER the unseen September tide the mist
Sweeps ever inland, winding in a shroud
Stark walls and toppling towers that in the cloud
Of streaming vapour soar and twirl and twist,
Unbuilt and rebuilt in grey smoke
Until the drifting shadowy bastions seem
The old phantasmal castle wherein man's dream
Seeks shelter from time's still-pursuing stroke.

And I recall how once above a sea
That under cold winds shivered steely clear,
Fresh from the chisel, clean-cut and white and hard,
These towers, rock-founded for eternity,
Glittered when Lancelot and Guinevere
One April morning came to Joyous Gard.

LIFE

ON the cliff's edge a dewy cluster of thrift
Sparkles like amethysts against the sea,
A sea of sapphire laced unceasingly
With little lines of foam, and wings that drift
And wheel and dip in mazy dazzling flight
Bewilderingly before my dreaming eyes,
That watch the snow and sapphire sink and rise,
Drowsed by the interweaving blue and white.

■

Yet in my chambered mind the while, I see
Within an attic in a swarming, high,
And cliff-like tenement that blocks the sky,
One knitting and one stitching at a hem,
Two patient women uncomplainingly
Talking of all that life has done to them.

THE PUFFIN

HE stooped down suddenly and thrust his hand
Into a tunnel in the shallow sand
Beneath a campion-clump, and brought to light
A brooding puffin with black wings clasped tight
To her white breast : but, twisting round her sleek
Pied darting head, her scarlet razor-beak
She snapped in anger, cutting his finger clean
To the very bone ; and on the clump of green
Among the campion blossoms white as foam
He dropped the bird, and watched her scurry home,
And laughed, while from his wounded finger dripped
Blood redder even than the beak that ripped
The flesh so cruelly, and, chuckling, said—
*Well, anyhow, the blood still runs as red
In my old veins as when I saw it spill
The first time that I felt a puffin's bill
Long years since : and it seems as though I had
As little sense as when I was a lad*

*To let myself be caught so easily,
 And that brave bird make such a fool of me,
 Who thought myself as wise as Solomon.
 Yet it is better to feel a fool's blood run
 Still quick and lively through the veins, and be
 A living fool beside the April sea,
 Than lie like Solomon in his unknown grave,
 A pinch of dry dust that no wit could save.*

THE LETTER

WHY was I moved to write
 To him the very night
 That he, unknown to me,
 Upon his deathbed lay
 With eyes that should not see
 Another break of day—

Eyes that should never read
 The long light-hearted screed
 That rippled from my pen ?
 Why should I write to him
 Whose sight was even then
 With the last darkness dim ?

For I had never heard
 From him a single word
 For years, nor even thought
 If he were ill or well :
 And when I wrote I'd naught
 That mattered much to tell.

Did the same memory
 That moment moving me
 To take my pen and write,
 Light-hearted as a boy,
 Move him on that last night
 To think of me with joy ?

Did his lost youth return
In one clear thought, and burn
His being with the glow
Of old enraptured hours
When, plunging through deep snow,
We faced the raking showers ?

Did death to him seem just
A wilder frolic gust
That caught his breath, and deep
In dazzling drowsy white
Of downy drifts did sleep
Steal over him that night ?

But time will never tell
Whether some fateful spell
Or only idle whim
Moved me to write a screed
Of chaffing words to him
That he would never read.

BY THE WEIR

A SCENT of esparto grass—and again I recall
That hour we spent by the weir of the paper-mill,
Watching together the curving thunderous fall
Of frothing amber, bemused by the roar until
My mind was as blank as the speckless sheets that wound
On the hot steel ironing rollers perpetually turning
In the humming dark rooms of the mill—all sense and discerning
By the stunning and dazzling oblivion of hill-waters drowned.

And my heart was empty of memory, hope, and desire
Till, rousing, I looked afresh on your face as you gazed—
Behind you an old gnarled fruit-tree in one still fire
Of innumerable flame in the sun of October blazed,
Scarlet and gold that the first white frost would spill
With eddying flicker and patter of dead leaves falling—
I looked on your face as an outcast from Eden recalling
A vision of Eve as she dallied bewildered and still

By the serpent-encircled Tree of Knowledge that flamed
 With gold and scarlet of good and evil, her eyes
 Rapt on the river of life : then bright and untamed
 By the labour and sorrow and fear of a world that dies,
 Your ignorant eyes looked up into mine ; and I knew
 That never our hearts should be one till your young lips had tasted
 The core of the bitter-sweet fruit, and, wise and toil-wasted,
 You should stand at my shoulder an outcast from Eden too.

YEAVINGER BELL

JUST to see the rain
 Sweeping over Yeavinger Bell
 Once again !

Just to see again
 Light break over Yeavinger Bell
 After rain !

CRUEL AND BRIGHT

CRUEL and bright as the whin
 Is my love, my love,
 And cold as the light of the linn
 The light of her eyes.

Free as the kestrel in air
 Is my love, my love,
 And dark as the heather, her hair,
 Beneath dark skies.

Like heather burned black by the fire
 Is my heart, my heart,
 Burned black to the ash of desire,
 As daylight dies.

FALLOWFIELD FELL

SOLDIER, what do you see,
Lying so cold and still ?
Fallowfield Fell at dawn
And the heather upon the hill.

Soldier, what do you see,
Lying so still and cold ?
Fallowfield Fell at noon
And the whin like burning gold.

Soldier, what do you see,
Lying so cold and still ?
Fallowfield Fell at night
And the stars above the hill.

AMBULANCE TRAIN

RED rowans in the rain
Above the rain-wet rock—
All night the lumbering train
With jolt and jar and shock,
And moan of men in pain,
Beats rumbling in my brain—
Red rowans in the rain
Above the rain-wet rock—
Again and yet again—
Red rowans in the rain.

MUGGLESWICK

A HAREBELL tossing in the wind
Upon the windy fell
Brings ever back into my mind
The tale I cannot tell.

The silvery gleam of cotton-grass
 Among dark heath and ling
 Brings back into my heart, alas !
 The song I cannot sing.

Deep buried under Muggleswick
 King Arthur lies asleep,
 But tale and song, still live and quick,
 Are buried yet more deep.

HARESHAW

THE heather's black on Hareshaw
 When Redesdale's lying white :
 When grass is green in Redesdale
 Dark Hareshaw blossoms bright.

They harvest hay in Redesdale
 For beasts within the byre :
 The heather upon Hareshaw
 Is harvested with fire.

O WHAT SAW YOU ?

O WHAT saw you in Flanders,
 Fighting for the king ?
Rain and mud, and mud and rain,
And never another thing.

O what saw you in Babylon,
 Fighting for the king ?
Sun and sand, and sand and sun,
And never another thing.

Are there no burns in Flanders,
 No tumbling burns that sing ?
 Are there no braes in Babylon
 Bonnie with broom and ling ?

*There are no burns in Flanders,
No tumbling burns that sing :
There are no braes in Babylon
Bonnie with broom and ling.*

Then I'll not go to Flanders,
Nor yet to Babylon,
But keep to my own country's
Clean rain and kindly sun.

Who will may dream of Bagdad
And sigh for Samarkand—
I'll live content with the windy bent
Of green Northumberland.

TARRAS WATER

FROM the top of Hartsgarth Fell
Runs the Tarras Burn,
Tinkling fall and golden pool,
Through the heather and the fern,
Calling, calling, clear and cool—
Tarras Water calling,
Tarras Water falling,
Tarras Water calling, calling—
Tarras Water, Tarras Water !

Through my heart the livelong night
Runs the Tarras Burn,
Golden pool and tinkling fall—
In the land of No Return
Still I hear that golden call,
Tarras Water calling,
Tarras Water falling,
Tarras Water calling, calling—
Tarras Water, Tarras Water !

THE LONELY TREE

A TWISTED ash, a ragged fir,
A silver birch with leaves astir.

Men talk of forests broad and deep
Where summer-long the shadows sleep.

Though I love forests deep and wide,
The lone tree on the bare hillside,

The brave wind-bitten lonely tree
Is rooted in the heart of me—

A twisted ash, a ragged fir,
A silver birch with leaves astir.

THIRLWALL

IN the last gleam of winter sun
A hundred starlings scream and screele
Among the ragged firs that stand
About the ruined Peel.

Bright singing birds of gold they were
To me when last, a little boy,
I came from Thirlwall, and they shook
The very sky with joy.

Still in that gleam of winter sun
A hundred starlings scream and screele
For ever in the ragged firs
About the ruined Peel.

THE HERON

'TWIXT Hardlee Knowe and Brocklielaw
Runs the Hyndlee Burn,
And there I saw a heron
Standing in the fern—

Standing in the young green fern,
Gaunt and grey and old ;
And suddenly the sky grew dark
And the wind blew cold.

Ghostly grey and still he stood
In the young green fern,
Listening to the tinkle, tinkle
Of the Hyndlee Burn.

DEADWATER

WHO goes to Deadwater by night
Beneath the witches' moon
Will never dance in the candle-light
To the merry crowder's tune.

Who comes from Deadwater by night
Beneath the witches' moon
Will only dance in the cold corpse-light
To the ghostly crowder's tune.

CANDLEGATE

WHO comes so late to Candlegate ?
Who comes so late
By rainy bent and roaring spate ?

Who knocks so late at Candlegate ?
Who knocks so late ?
Who knocks so late yet will not wait ?

Who rides in state from Candlegate ?
Who rides in state
By rainy bent and roaring spate ?
Who rides so slow yet will not wait
Nor bide at all for love or hate ?

CLATTERING FORD

WHAT did you hear at Clattering Ford
 Last night as you lay by the Black Line Burn ?
Only the swish of a brandished sword
And a heavy thud in the fern.

What did you hear as you lay in the ling,
 Last night as you lay in the ling alone ?
Only a splashing of hoofs and the ring
Of flying hoofs upon stone.

What did you see as you lay last night,
 Last night as you lay in the ling and the fern ?
Only the moonshine silvering white
The waters of Black Line Burn.

THE EMPTY PURSE

ONE song leads on to another,
 One friend to another friend ;
 So I'll travel along
 With a friend and a song—
 I'll travel along
 Ten thousand strong
 To the end.

But if all songs should fail me
 And friend fail after friend,
 I'll still have you
 O tried and true—
 I'll still have you,
 And a stone in my shoe
 To the end.

THE PARROTS

SOMEWHERE, somewhen I've seen,
But where or when I'll never know,
Three parrots of shrill green
With crests of shriller scarlet flying
Out of black cedars as the sun was dying
Against cold peaks of snow.

From what forgotten life
Of other worlds I cannot tell
Flashes that screeching strife :
Yet the shrill colour and the strident crying
Sing through my blood and set my heart replying
And jangling like a bell.

THE WILLOWS

IN the round hollow of the moonlit meadow
Over the pond the seven willows shiver,
And in the ghostly misty shine their branches
Rustle and glance and quiver—

Rustle and glance and quiver in the moonshine—
The seven sisters shaking sea-green tresses
Over the round pond's misty mirror, whispering
Strange secrets to the shadow in the cresses.

WORLDS

THROUGH the pale forest of tall bracken-stalks
Whose interwoven fronds, a jade-green sky,
Above me glimmer infinitely high,
Towards my giant hand a beetle walks
In glistening emerald mail ; and as I lie
Watching his progress through huge grassy blades
And over pebble boulders, my own world fades
And shrinks to the vision of a beetle's eye.

Within that forest world of twilit green,
 Ambushed with unknown perils, one endless day
 I travel down the beetle-trail, between
 Huge glossy boles, through green infinity . . .
 Till flashes a glimpse of blue sea through the bracken asway,
 And my world is again a tumult of windy sea.

THE RIDGE

HERE on the ridge where the shrill north-easter trails
 Low clouds along the snow,
 And in a streaming moonlit vapour veils
 The peopled earth below,

Let me, O life, a little while forget
 The horror of past years—
 Man and his agony and bloody sweat,
 The terror and the tears,

And struggle only with the mist and snow
 Against the hateless wind,
 Till scourged and shriven I again may go
 To dwell among my kind.

1919.

RUGBY : 1917

I

ALL day the droning of the aeroplanes,
 Above the hot brick buildings in the blaze,
 That in their skyey gliding seem to graze
 The air to fiercer fire above gilt vanes,
 Sleek purple roofs, sharp-pricking spires and towers
 Of glowing mottled brick ; and through my head
 That droning hums and purrs as, aching red
 And staring blue, trail by the unending hours.

But under silvery olive-trees he sleeps,
Tombed in a hill of marble on the Isle
Of Skyros that once, veiled in shimmering rain,
I saw in passing. On the rosy steeps
And silvery trees he looked a little while,
Then turned to slumber, never to wake again.

II

He slumbers, but his living words sing on,
Lighting for ever the dark hearts of men,
The hearts of men on whom his presence shone
Living, who'll never see his like again
In this world, and strange hearts that caught no gleam
Of the golden spirit until his radiant death
Blazoned it over all the earth, a breath
Of singing fire from sunset shores of dream.

O singing fire, O starry words that sang
A moment through his lighted blood, and live
When he who gave you loving life is dead,
For ever to that fallen golden head
And the laughing golden heart from which you sprang
Starry and singing and deathless life you give.

BLOOM

LABURNUM, lilac, honeysuckle, broom,
Syringa, rowan, hawthorn, guelder-rose,
Azalea, rose, and elder—summer glows
About me in sultry smother of scent and bloom
Shut in between the old walls' mossy brick :
Yet, as in the green and golden gloom I dream
In the drowsy dazzle of perfume and colour astream,
An upland odour stings me to the quick—
The shrewd remembered smell, sharp, clean, and cold,
Of peat and moss, where never blossoms blow
Under the shadow of bleak whinstone scars
The summer-long, or only rarely show
Over black pools the sundew's stars of gold
Or grass-of-Parnassus' cold white scentless stars.

VICTIMS

ABOVE me on the ridge an old grey ram
With ragged fleece, black muzzle, and yellow eye,
Tangled in briars, against the lurid sky
Seems even now to await the Abraham
Who shall release and slay him—patiently
On this high altar of bleak stone and ice,
With head bowed ready for the sacrifice,
To await the whetted blade of destiny.

He waits unwondering, foreboding naught,
With blank cold shallow eye and easy breath,
Nor knows himself the destined victim caught,
Nor dreads the slicing sacrificial knife—
While Abraham, ever in the shadow of death,
Trembles to look upon the angel of life.

ISHMAEL

HE came at last to a cadaverous land
Beneath a breathless livid sky supine,
And limping over the burnt stone and sand
Reached a sleek lake of glazed unrippling brine ;
And, standing ankle-deep in brittle salt
That crusted the flat marge with prickling white,
Lifted his eyes to the grey sunless vault
And waited for the coming on of night.

But never night with black oblivious balm
Or the healing lucency of starlight stole
Across the arid sky of aching grey.
Undying, by the dead lake's stagnant calm,
Caged in uncrumbling bones, for ever his soul
Stares at the blind face of unending day.

THE DANCER

SHEATHED in scales of silver sequins,
In a blue pool of limelight dancing,
She twists and twirls and smiles and beckons
With dark eyes glancing—

She beckons to me in my skyey seat
With smiling teeth and dark eyes glancing :
But I only see as I watch her dancing
The shadows that seek to tangle her feet.

INSPIRATION

ON the uttermost far-flung ridge of ice and snow
That over pits of sunset fire hangs sheer
My naked spirit poises, then leaps clear
From the cold crystal into the furnace-glow
Of ruby and amber lucencies, and dives
For the brief moment of ten thousand lives
Through fathomless infinities of light,
Then cleansed by lustral flame and frost returns ;
And for an instant through my body burns
The immortal fire of cold white ecstasy,
As down the darkening valley of the night
I keep the old track of mortality.

BRIC-À-BRAC

INTO the room the level sunrays stream,
Shooting from under a low rainy cloud
Through shivering branches of a poplar bowed
In the wind of sunset ; and in golden dream
The dull day ends ; and the walls of creamy white
Quiver with rippling gold that fills the glass
Of a green amphora with wine-gold light,
And burnishes the old Benares brass.

And suddenly in the quickening glory of gold,
Buddha, who long has brooded in the gloom
Overshadowed by a curved Ascari knife,
Wrapt in his robe of reverie manifold
Glowes young and fair, a very lord of life,
Until his presence fills the little room.

FIRE

I

ACROSS the Cleveland countryside the train
Panted and jolted through the lurid night
Of monstrous slag-heaps in the leaping light
Of belching furnaces : the driving rain
Lacing the glass with gold in that red glare
That momentarily revealed the cinderous land
Of blasted fields, that stretched on either hand,
With livid waters gleaming here and there.

By hovels of men who labour till they die
With iron and the fire that never sleeps,
We plunged in pitchy night among huge heaps—
Then once again that red glare lit the sky,
And high above the highest hill of slag
I saw Prometheus hanging from his crag.

FIRE

II

In each black tile a mimic fire's aglow,
And in the hearthlight old mahogany,
Ripe with stored sunshine that in Mexico
Poured like gold wine into the living tree
Summer on summer through a century,
Burns like a crater in the heart of night ;
And all familiar things in the ingle-light
Glow with a secret strange intensity.

And I remember hidden fires that burst
Suddenly from the midnight while men slept,
Long-smouldering rages in the darkness nursed
That to an instant ravening fury leapt,
And the old terror menacing evermore
A crumbling world with fiery molten core.

ELEGY

STARS that fall through crystal skies,
Winds that sink in songless death,
Are the light within man's eyes
And his body's breath.

For a little while he burns
Fitfully, a windy spark,
Ere his shrivelled soul returns
To the outer dark.

CASUALTIES

TO MICHAEL

*If the promise of your coming's true,
And you should live through years of peace,
O son of mine, forget not these,
The sons of man, who died for you.*

ANGUS ARMSTRONG

GHOSTLY through the drifting mist the lingering snow-wreaths
glimmer,
And ghostly comes the lych-owl's hunting cry,
And ghostly with wet fleeces in the watery moon ashimmer,
One by one the grey sheep slowly pass me by.

One by one through bent and heather disappearing in the hollow,
Ghostly shadows down the grassy track they steal ;
And I dread to see them passing, lest a ghost behind them follow—
A ghost from Flanders follow, dog at heel.

ALAN GORDON

ROSES he loved and their outlandish names—
Gloire de Dijon, Léonie Lamesch,
Chateau du Clos Vougeot, like living flames
They kindled in his memory afresh
As, lying in the mud of France, he turned
His eyes to the grey sky, light after light ;
And last within his dying memory burned
Chateau du Clos Vougeot's deep crimson night.

JACK ALLEN

*I'm mighty fond of blackberry jam, he said—
It tastes of summer. When I come again
You'll give me some for tea, and soda-bread ?*

Black clusters throng each bramble-spray burned red
And over-ripe are rotting in the rain :
But not for him is any table spread
Who comes not back again.

MARTIN AKENSHAW

HEAVY the scent of elder in the air
As on the night he went : the starry bloom
He'd brushed in passing dusted face and hair,
And the hot fragrance filled the little room.

Heavy the scent of elder—in the night
Where I lie lone abed with stifling breath
And eyes that dread to see the morning light,
The heavy fume of elder smells of death.

RALPH STRAKER

SOFTLY out of the dove-grey sky
Drift the snowflakes fine and dry
Till braeside and bottom are all heaped high.

Remembering how he would love to go
Over the crisp and the creaking snow,
I wonder that now he can lie below

If softly out of the Flanders sky
Drift the snowflakes fine and dry
Till crater and shell-hole are all heaped high.

DONALD FRASER

HE polished granite tombstones all his life
To earn a living for his bairns and wife,
Till he was taken for the war, and he
Went his first voyage over the salt sea.

Now somewhere underneath the Flemish skies
Sunk in unsounded flats of mud he lies
In a vast moundless grave, unnamed, unknown,
Nor marked at head or foot by stock or stone.

PETER PROUDFOOT

HE cleaned out middens for his daily bread :
War took him overseas and in a bed
Of lilies-of-the-valley dropt him dead.

JOE BARNES

To a proud peacock strutting tail-in-air
He clipped the yew each thirteenth of July—
No feather ruffled, sleek and debonair,
Clean-edged it cut the yellow evening sky.

But he returns no more, who went across
The narrow seas one thirteenth of July ;
And drearily all day the branches toss,
Ragged and dark against the rainy sky.

DICK MILBURN

HE stood against the trunk to light his pipe
And, glancing at the green boughs overhead,
We'll pinch those almonds when they're ripe, he said.

But, now the almond-shells are brown and ripe,
Somewhere in No-man's-land he's lying dead,
And other lads are pinching them instead.

I've half a mind to save him one or two
In case his ghost comes back to claim a few,
And do the other things he meant to do.

PHILIP DAGG

IT pricked like needles slashed into his face,
The unceasing rustling smother of dry snow
That stormed the ridge on that hell-raking blast—

And then he knew the end had come at last,
And stumbled blindly, muttering *Cheerio!*
Into eternity, and left no trace.

JOHN ELSDON

STRIPPED mother-naked save for a gold ring,
Where all day long the gaping doctors sit
Decreeing life or death, he proudly passed
In his young manhood—and they found him fit.

Of all that lustiness of flesh and blood
The crash of death has not left anything,
But tumbled somewhere in the Flanders mire
Unbroken lies the golden wedding-ring.

NOEL DARK

SHE sleeps in bronze, the Helen of his dream,
Within the quiet of my little room,
Touched by the kindling birch-log's fitful gleam
To tenderer beauty in the rosy gloom.

She sleeps in bronze ; and he who fashioned her,
Shaping the wet clay with such eager joy,
Slumbers as soundly where the cold winds stir
The withered tussocks on the plains of Troy.

MARK ANDERSON

ON the low table by the bed
Where it was set aside last night,
Beyond the bandaged lifeless head,
It glitters in the morning light—

And as the hours of morning pass
I cannot sleep, I cannot think,
But only gaze upon the glass
Of water that he could not drink.

LAMENT

WE who are left, how shall we look again
Happily on the sun or feel the rain,
Without remembering how they who went
Ungrudgingly, and spent
Their all for us, loved too the sun and rain ?

A bird among the rain-wet lilac sings—
But we, how shall we turn to little things,
And listen to the birds and winds and streams
Made holy by their dreams,
Nor feel the heart-break in the heart of things ?

IN KHAKE

THE KITTIWAKE

WITH blistered heels and bones that ache,
Marching through pitchy ways and blind,
The miry track is hard to make ;
Yet, ever hovering in my mind,
Above red crags a kittiwake
Hangs motionless against the wind—

Grey-winged, white-breasted and black-eyed,
Against red crags of porphyry
That pillar from a sapphire tide
A sapphire sky. . . . Indifferently
The raw lad limping at my side
Blasphemes his boots, the world, and me. . . .

Still keen, unwavering and alert,
Within my aching empty mind
The bright bird hovers—and the dirt
Of bottomless black ways and blind,
And all the hundred things that hurt
Past healing, seem to drop behind.

MEDICAL OFFICER'S CLERK

LET me forget these sordid histories,
These callous records of obscene disease,
This world of scabies and of syphilis
Wherein I drudge until my whole world is
Besotted by the sodden atmosphere. . . .

Let me remember Venus dawning clear
Through beryl seas of air, a crystal flame—
Glistening as from the cold salt wave she came,
Over the far and ghostly hills of Wales,
Dwindling in darkness as the twilight fails. . . .

Let me recall the singing and the shine
 Of the clear amber waters of the Tyne,
 Pouring from peaty uplands of black moss
 Over grey boulders where the salmon toss
 Wet curving silver bodies in the air,
 Scrambling in shoals to climb the salmon-stair
 Over the roaring weir. . . .

Let me again
 In that huge, clanking, and eternal train
 Over the prairies of Dakota go—
 League after league of level stainless snow
 Stretching unbroken under the low sky,
 World without end to all eternity,
 Until desire and dream and all delight
 Drowse to oblivion in a timeless white
 Unundulating wilderness. . . .

Or let me sail
 Again up the blue Bosphorus within hail
 Of many-fountained gardens of the rose,
 Where bloom on bloom the summer burns and glows,
 By minarets that soar like lily-blooms
 About the shimmering white mushroom domes
 Of marble mosques in groves of cypresses. . . .

Till I remember no more histories
 Of horror, or in drudgery and fret
 Of endless days no longer quite forget
 The stars and singing waters and the snow,
 And how the roses of Arabia blow.

THE CHART

DRAWING red lines on a chart
 With diligent ruler and pen,
 Keeping a record of men,
 Numbers and names in black ink—
 Numbers and names that were men. . . .

With diligent ruler and pen
 Drawing red lines on a chart—
 Would you not break, O my heart,
 If you stopped but a moment to think !

THE CONSCRIPT

INDIFFERENT, flippant, earnest, but all bored,
The doctors sit in the glare of electric light
Watching the endless stream of naked white
Bodies of men for whom their hasty award
Means life or death maybe, or the living death
Of mangled limbs, blind eyes, or a darkened brain ;
And the chairman, as his monocle falls again,
Pronounces each doom with easy indifferent breath.

Then suddenly I shudder as I see
A young man stand before them wearily,
Cadaverous as one already dead ;
But still they stare untroubled as he stands
With arms outstretched and drooping thorn-crowned head,
The nail-marks glowing in his feet and hands.

SUSPENSE

As gaudy flies across a pewter plate
On the grey disc of the unrippling sea
Beneath an airless sullen sky of slate
Dazzled destroyers zigzag restlessly ;
While underneath the sleek and livid tide,
Blind monsters nosing through the soundless deep,
Lean submarines among blind fishes glide
And through primeval weedy forests sweep.

Over the hot grey surface of my mind
Glib motley rumours zigzag without rest ;
While deep within the darkness of my breast
Monstrous desires, lean, sinister and blind,
Slink through unsounded night and stir the slime
And ooze of oceans of forgotten time.

AIR-RAID

NIGHT shatters in mid-heaven—the bark of guns,
The roar of planes, the crash of bombs, and all
The unshackled skyey pandemonium stuns
The senses to indifference, when a fall

Of masonry nearby startles awake,
 Tingling, wide-eyed, prick-eared, with bristling hair,
 Each sense within the body, crouched aware
 Like some sore-hunted creature in the brake.

Yet side by side we lie in the little room,
 Just touching hands, with eyes and ears that strain
 Keenly, yet dream-bewildered, through tense gloom,
 Listening, in helpless stupor of insane
 Drugged nightmare panic fantastically wild,
 To the quiet breathing of our little child.

RAGTIME

A MINX in khaki struts the limelit boards :
 With false moustache, set smirk, and ogling eyes
 And straddling legs and swinging hips she tries
 To swagger it like a soldier, while the chords
 Of rampant ragtime jangle, clash and clatter,
 And over the brassy blare and drumming din
 She strains to squirt her squeaky notes and thin
 Spirtle of sniggering lascivious patter.

Then out into the jostling Strand I turn,
 And down a dark lane to the quiet river,
 One stream of silver under the full moon,
 And think of how cold searchlights flare and burn
 Over dank trenches where men crouch and shiver,
 Humming, to keep their hearts up, that same tune.

LEAVE

CROUCHED on the crowded deck, we watch the sun
 In naked gold leap out of a cold sea
 Of shivering silver ; and stretching drowsily
 Crampt legs and arms, relieved that night is done
 And the slinking deep-sea peril past, we turn
 Westward to see the chilly sparkling light
 Quicken the Wicklow Hills, till jewel-bright
 In their spring freshness of dewy green they burn.

And silent on the deck beside me stands
A comrade, lean and brown, with restless hands
And eyes that stare unkindling on the life
And rapture of green hills and glistening morn :
He comes from Flanders home to his dead wife,
And I, from England to my son new-born.

BACCHANAL

(NOVEMBER 1918)

INTO the twilight of Trafalgar Square
They pour from every quarter, banging drums
And tootling penny trumpets—to a blare
Of tin mouth-organs, while a sailor strums
A solitary banjo, lads and girls
Locked in embraces in a wild dishevel
Of flags and streaming hair, with curdling skirls
Surge in a frenzied reeling panic revel.

Lads who so long have stared death in the face,
Girls who so long have tended death's machines,
Released from the numb terror shriek and prance—
And, watching them, I see the outrageous dance,
The frantic torches and the tambourines
Tumultuous on the midnight hills of Thrace.

CAMOUFLAGE

OUT of the puddle of his mind there poured
A sickly trickle of obscenities,
Till some chance word of mine waked into life
Within his heart half-frozen memories :

And then with shining eyes he talked of home,
His wife and their one bairn, a little lass,
And all her darling ways ; but suddenly
I saw the radiance from his blue eyes pass

As, slouching up to us, another chum
Cursed the lancejack with casual blasphemies ;
And once again from that slack mouth outpoured
A sickly trickle of obscenities.

BAGGAGE

THREE girls who still have something of the grace
Of fleeting girlishness in form and face,
Tricked out in all their fripperies await
The first three comers through the barrack-gate.

They await the first three comers, any three,
Smart, sullen, loutish, swaggering or brave—
Soldiers who'll soon forget them for the grave—
Lovers whom they'll forget as easily
As they've forgotten last year's finery.

LONG TOM

HE talked of Delhi brothels half the night,
Quaking with fever ; and then, dragging tight
The frowsy blankets to his chattering chin,
Cursed for an hour because they were so thin
And nothing would keep out that gnawing cold—
Scarce forty years of age, and yet so old,
Haggard and worn with burning eyes set deep—
Until at last he cursed himself asleep.

Before I'd shut my eyes reveille came ;
And as I dressed by the one candle-flame
The mellow golden light fell on his face
Still sleeping, touching it to tender grace,
Rounding the features life had scarred so deep,
Till youth came back to him in quiet sleep :
And then what women saw in him I knew
And why they'd love him all his brief life through.

SENTRY GO

TRUE lad who shared the guard with me
That night of whirling snow,
What other nights have brought to you
I may not know.

Although I never heard your name,
And hardly saw your face,
You poured out all your heart to me
As we kept pace.

I don't know if you're living still
Or fallen in the fight ;
But in my heart your heart is safe
Till the last night.

REVEILLE

STILL bathed in its moonlit slumber, the little white house by the
cedar
Stands silent against the red dawn ;
And nothing I know of who sleeps there, to the travail of day yet
unwakened,
Behind the blue curtains undrawn.

But I dream as we march down the roadway, ringing loud and
rime-white in the moonlight,
Of a little dark house on a hill
Wherein when the battle is over, to the rapture of day yet un-
wakened,
We shall slumber as dreamless and still.

TRAVELS

AULLA

BRONZED hills of oak that sweep
Up to Carrara's peaks of snow
Against a blue November sky,
Burnished with evening sunshine, glow
And bask in drowsy sleep—
When piercingly a cry
Rings from the little town below,
And startled echoes leap
From steep to steep.

What soul in agony
Cried out at sunset long ago
I'll never know ;
But in my memory perpetually
Bronze hills and silver peaks and steely sky
Reverberate with that despairing cry.

THE CAKEWALK

IN smoky limelight of a Smyrna café
He sees them, seven solemn negroes dancing
With faces rapt and out-thrust bellies prancing
In a slow, solemn, ceremonial cakewalk,
Dancing and prancing to the sombre tom-tom
Thumped by a crook-backed grizzled negro squatting.
And as he watches . . . in the steamy twilight
Of swampy forest in rank greenness rotting,
That sombre tom-tom at his heartstrings strumming
Sets all his sinews twitching and a singing
Of cold fire through his blood—and he is dancing
Among his fellows in the dank green twilight,
With naked, oiled, bronze-gleaming bodies swinging
In a rapt, holy, everlasting cakewalk,
For evermore in slow procession prancing.

THESSALY

SUN-STEEPED translucent marble and, beyond,
Pale marble hills of amethyst and rose
Above the shadowy olive-grove that shows
A sea-green shimmer, like a tide-left pond
Of brackish waters under the pale blue sky
Of the unclouded noon of Thessaly ;
And over that pallid land and pallid sea
Obviously the sultry hours drift by—
Drift by in sun-steeped and translucent dream,
Till suddenly a sea-gull's strident scream
Stabs through my sense, and once again I ride
In a little coble the dark tossing tide
Of glancing, shivering Northern seas, a boy
Chanting to that dark sky the tale of Troy.

SMYRNA

OVER the mountain's shadowed snow,
A rosy flake, the moon
Drifts in the beryl glow
Of early night ;
And over the still sea
Of malachite
Sings from the marble quay,
Where blue-black Nubians crouch in shivering cold,
A shrill and reedy tune
My heart first heard
In Uganda forests piped by some dead bird
In unremembered days of old.

CHALLENGE

WHY does the sea-mew scream
When I would lie at rest,
Floating in dreamless dream
On the dark sea's breast,

Floating forgetfully
On the unremembering sea
Of eternity ?

Sick of the endless fret
Of blind and bitter strife,
Fain would my heart forget
The challenge of life :
But foam-heads ruffle and gleam,
And tumult shatters my dream
At the sea-mew's scream.

ON BROADWAY

DAFFODILS dancing by moonlight in English meadows,
Moon-pale daffodils under the April moon—
Here in the throng and clangour and hustle of Broadway,
Broadway brawling and loud in the glare of the noon,
Comes to me now as a half-remembered tune
The silence and wonder of daffodils dancing by moonlight,
Dreamily dancing in dew-sprinkled moonshiny meadows,
Ghostly daffodils under a ghostly moon.

IN FIFTH AVENUE

A NEGRO in a dandy livery
Of blue and silver, dangling from one hand
A rose-emblazoned bandbox jauntily,
With conscious smile of gold and ivory
He ambles down the side-walk. . . .

And I see

Him naked in a steamy forest-land
Of dense green swamp beneath a dripping tree,
Crouched for the spring and grinning greedily.

ON STATEN ISLAND : 1917

OUT of the bosky glen into the still summer night,
Fluttering, twinkling, sparkling, light upon fairy light,
The fireflies dance and glance in an endless flickering flight.

And over the still grey Narrows, stabbing the silvery haze,
The flaring festal lights of Coney Island blaze
Where men and women dance in a razzling dazzling daze.

And, sitting in silence under the dark unrustling trees,
We think of the lads who crouch in trenches overseas
With eyes that stare all night on other lights than these.

THE LOST RING

THRIDDING the little tangled wood that crested
With silver birch the silvery wave-like dune,
A slashing twig from off my finger wrested
The golden ring just as the wintry moon
Plunged in black cloud, and from my clutching hand
It tumbled noiseless in the shadowy sand.

All night in vain with fearful eager fingers
I raked among the sand and rustling leaves :
Dawn came : noon passed : and now the last light lingers
Along the lake, and still my cold heart grieves
Love's token lost, as through my naked hand
Life seems to trickle coldly as dead sand.

IN INDIANA

SNOW on the hills and stars in a crystal sky . . .
Around me the golden leagues of the prairie lie
Under the blaze of July :

And my heart turns home to the hills in their wintry white
As I saw them last on that last December night
Lustrous in cold starlight—

To the hills of my heart that are far over land and sea,
And the snug little house on the Beacon where I would be,
That is all-in-all to me.

So, under the glare of July,
While around me the aching leagues of the prairie lie,
I long for the snow on the hills and the stars in a crystal sky.

BY LAKE MICHIGAN

As out of intricate wintry woods to-night
Through white dunes suddenly on the starlit lake
I came, and saw the windy waters break,
Frothing along the sand, beneath the light
Of far steel furnaces whose ruddy flare
Was mingled with the glitter of stars, once more
Among the ghostly dunes of that far shore
I knew the desolation of despair.

Though I by day and night unceasingly
Hunger for you and for the hills of home,
Yet that heart-breaking beauty of starry foam
And rosy fire to livelier agony
Shivered my courage—till in dreams you came
And filled my heart with stars and rosy flame.

WINDOWS

I

THE hills of Wales burned only dimmer gold
Beneath gold skies, as over the green shires
I looked from my high window on the fires
Of sunset kindling ; but they could not hold
My vagrant thought that in an instant leapt
To a window overseas, that from a height
Looks down an alley where a girl one night
Was done to death while, knowing naught, I slept.

And, brooding in my chair, I wonder why
The golden uplands and the golden sky
Should bring that horror of the dark to mind,
And in my consciousness I seek to trace
The ray that glimmers through dark ways and blind
Between the sunset and a dead girl's face.

II

If I could live within the ray of light
That runs through all things everlastingly—
Not only glimpse in moments of clear sight
The glancing of the golden shuttles that ply
'Twixt things diverse in seeming, stars and mud,
Innocence and the deed in darkness done,
The victim and the spiller of the blood—
The light that weaves the universe in one,

Then might my heart have ease and rest content
On the golden upland under the clear sky :
But ever must my restless days be spent
Following the fugitive gleam until I die—
Light-shotten darkness, glory struck from strife,
Terror to beauty kindling, death to life.

TRAVELS

ATLANTIC and Pacific I have sailed,
And sojourned in old cities of Cathay,
Icy Himalayas and stark Alps I've scaled,
And up great golden rivers thrust my way
Through crass, green, acrid, ominous dripping night
Of Senegambia : over the still snows
Of polar lands flushed with unfading rose
Of the rayless sun's cold, clipped, unkindling light,
Through the Grand Canyon's twilit mystery,
And over Arizona's sand and stone,
I travel the round world unceasingly,
Unresting, uncompanioned and apart—
Yet never may I pierce the dark unknown
And undiscovered country of my own heart.

RETURN

RUST-RED the bracken in the rain
Against the wet grey boulder—
Slowly the cold mist sweeps again
Over the mountain-shoulder,
And the wind blows colder.

Since last I saw the mist and rain
Sweep down the mountain-shoulder,
Some joy that will not come again
Has left a heart grown older,
And the wind blows colder.

HOME

WINGS

As a jade-necked mallard alighting in a pool
Among marsh-marigolds and splashing wet
Green leaves and yellow blooms, like jewels set
In bright black mud, with clear drops crystal-cool,
Bringing keen savours of the sea and stir
Of windy spaces where wild sunsets flame
To that dark inland dyke, the thought of her
Into my brooding stagnant being came.

And all my senses quickened into life,
Tingling and glittering, and the salt and fire
Sang through my singing blood in eager strife,
Until through crystal airs we seemed to be
Soaring together, one fleet-winged desire
Of windy sunsets and the wandering sea.

DREAM-COME-TRUE

DEAREST, while it would sometimes seem
As if I really had the art
Of putting into words the dream
That fills another's heart ;

And though in its own dream-come-true
My heart sings ever like a bird's,
The wonder of my life with you
I cannot put in words.

ONE-DAY-OLD

(A. G. G.)

BABY asleep on my arm,
Would that my heart could enfold you,
Cherish you, shelter you, hold you
Ever from harm.

Born in a season of strife,
When warring with fire and with thunder
Men wantonly shatter asunder
All that was life—

Into a world full of death
You come with a gift for the living
Of quiet grey eyes and a giving
Of innocent breath.

Baby asleep on my arm,
Would that my heart could enfold you,
Cherish you, shelter you, hold you
Ever from harm.

1916.

TO AUDREY

A CROCUS brimmed with morning light,
Burning clean and amber clear,
Single on the wet black mould—

So to me you come, who hold
Heaven in your heart, my dear,
Every morning out of night.

MICHAEL

WHY should he wake up chuckling ? Only hark !
Chuckle on chuckle, lying in the dark
Alone in his little cot. What may there be
That we for all our wisdom cannot see,
Gazing grave-eyed, in the old heart of night
To fill his baby heart with such delight ?

BLACK STITCHEL

As I was lying on Black Stichel
The wind was blowing from the South ;
And I was thinking of the laughters
Of my love's mouth.

As I was lying on Black Stichel
The wind was blowing from the West ;
And I was thinking of the quiet
Of my love's breast.

As I was lying on Black Stichel
The wind was blowing from the North ;
And I was thinking of the countries
Black with wrath.

As I was lying on Black Stichel
The wind was blowing from the East ;
And I could think no more for pity
Of man and beast.

SUNSETS

WHEN the world fell to pieces, and we stood
Stripped to disaster in the surge and reel
Of crashing nations, still too numbed to feel,
Too stunned to think, we knew one thing held good

Above the strife, and though all else should fail
That made life lovely underneath the sun,
Love, that from the beginning made us one,
Against annihilation should prevail.

And when on the shivering edge of the unknown
Unfathomed darkness each must stand alone,
With eyes that look their last upon the light,
Regretful and bewildered, we'll not shrink
But, still undoubting, over the last brink
Step down unfalteringly into the night.

THE STAIR

DEAR, when you climbed the icy Matterhorn,
Or braved the crouching green-eyed jungle-night—
With heart exultant in the sheer white light
Of the snow-peak, or cowering forlorn
In the old Indian darkness terror-torn,
Had you no inkling on that crystal height,
Or in the shuddering gloom, how on a flight
Of London stairs we'd meet one winter's morn ?

And when we met, dear, did you realise
That as I waited, watching you descend,
Glad in the sunlight of your eyes and hair,
And you the first time looked into my eyes,
Your wanderings were done, and on that stair
I too, O Love, had reached the journey's end ?

THE EMPTY COTTAGE

OVER the meadows of June
The plovers are crying
All night under the moon
That silvers with ghostly light
The thatch of the little old cottage, so lonely to-night.

Lonely and empty it stands
By the signpost that stretches white hands,
Pointing to far-away lands
Where alone and apart we are lying.

Lonely and empty of all delight
It stands in the blind white night ;
And under the thatch there is no one to hark to the crying,
The restless voices of plovers flying and crying
Over the meadows of June,
All night under the moon
Crying . . .

THE CLIFFS

IN the warm dusk of the moonless summer night,
As on the shingle by the still dark sea
We rest, the chalk-cliffs beetle eerily
Over us, glimmering a ghostly white ;
And silence steals upon us as we lie
Watching a far-off intermittent light,
Momently flashing cold and dazzling-bright
Between the dark tide and the moonless sky.

We watch the flashing light that seems to flare
An instant only between centuries
Of ominous grey midnight, and we stare
With eager peering eyes into the gloom,
While over our little lives in shadow loom
Primeval, cold, still, ghostly presences.

HOUSES

THE house we built with hands,
To shelter love's delight
From the pitchy night,
Dark and empty stands.

But from our house of dreams
Everlasting light
Through the pitchy night
Pours in golden streams.

WORCESTER BEACON

WHEN every spur of whin's a spike of ice,
Each grassy tussock bristling blades of steel,
Each withered bracken-frond a rare device
Of sparkling crystal crackling under-heel
With brittle tinkling, then it is the time,
O Love, to leave the chilly hearth and climb
The sunlit Beacon, where the live airs blow
Along the clean wave-edge of drifted snow.

Love, let us go
And scale the ridge : I long to see you there
Breathing the eager air
With cheeks aglow,
The sunlight on your hair :
O Love, I long to share
With you a moment the white ecstasy
And crystal silence of eternity.

WORDS

COULD I, without weak words that fret and grieve,
Fashion of singing airs and living light
The invisible fabric that the swallows weave
At sunset in their interlacing flight,
A sheer imperishable ecstasy
To clothe your spirit in viewless singing fire,
Then should I labour to my heart's desire,
Nor fear to dim your spirit's lucency.

But I have only words, words born in stress
And travail, for your spirit's loveliness :
Yet may not my dark syllables in their flight
Through other minds weave out of song and light
The fabric of my dream, that all men see
Your spirit's beauty through eternity ?

THE SADDLE

THE Saddle—where that August noon we basked
Above the gorse in the quivering golden glow—
Was a smother of white mist and driving snow
That, stinging, blinding and bewildering, tasked
My utmost powers as in the wan twilight
I crossed the ridge this afternoon alone,
Plunging thigh-deep through drifts of whirling white
In a wind that seemed to strip me to the bone.

Yet as I struggled through the drifts I knew
No sharp regret for golden days gone by ;
For in my heart was the blaze and scent and bloom
Of unforgotten summers, as I thought of you
And the happy babes even then awaiting me
In the golden hearthlight of our little room.

SONG

I LONG to shape in stone
What life has meant to me,
That my delight be known
To all eternity.

Though in love's praise I give
To time frail words alone,
Yet may not song outlive
All perishable stone ?

QUIET

ONLY the footprints of the partridge run
Over the billowy drifts of the mountain-side ;
And now on level wings the brown birds glide,
Following the snowy curves, and in the sun
Bright birds of gold above the stainless white
They move, and as their pale blue shadows move,
With them my heart glides on in golden flight
Over the hills of quiet to my love.

Storm-shaken, racked with terror through the long
Tempestuous night, in the quiet blue of morn
Love drinks the crystal airs, and peace newborn
Within his troubled heart, on wings aglow
Soars into rapture, as from the quiet snow
The golden birds, and out of silence, song.

KRINDLESYKE

(1922)

From one generation to another.

TO
CATHERINE AND LASCELLES ABERCROMBIE

NOTE

Though *Krindlesyke* was not conceived with a view to stage-production, the author reserves the acting rights.

It may be added that, while the work is not written in dialect, a number of local words have outcropped in the course of the dialogue; but as these are for the most part words expressive of emotion, rather than words conveying information, the sense of them should be easily gathered even by the South-country reader.—W. G.

KRINDLESYKE

PRELUDE

FOUR bleak stone walls, an eaveless bleak stone roof,
Like a squared block of native crag it stands
Hunched on skirlnaked windy fells aloof :
Yet was it built by patient human hands—
Hands, that have long been dust, chiselled each stone
And bedded it secure; and from the square
Squat chimney-stack, hither and thither blown,
The reek of human fires still floats in air
And perishes, as life on life burns through.
Square-set and stark to every blast that blows
It bears the brunt of time, withstands anew
Wildfires of tempest and league-scouring snows,
Dour and unshaken by any mortal doom,
Timeless, unstirred by any mortal dream :
And ghosts of reivers gather in the gloom
About it muttering when the lych-owls scream.

BOOK I
PHOEBE BARRASFORD

BOOK I

PHOEBE BARRASFORD

Krindlesyke is a remote shepherd's cottage on the Northumbrian fells, at least three miles from any other habitation. It consists of two rooms, a but and a ben. EZRA BARRASFORD, an old herd, blind and decrepit, sits in an arm-chair in the but, or living-room, near the open door on a mild afternoon in April. ELIZA BARRASFORD, his wife, is busy making griddle-cakes over a peat fire.

ELIZA (*glancing at the wag-at-the-wa'*). It's hard on three o'clock, and they'll be home

Before so very long now.

EZRA. Eh, what's that ?

ELIZA. You're growing duller every day. I said They'd soon be home now.

EZRA. They ! And who be they ?

ELIZA. My faith, you've got a memory like a milk-sile ! You've not forgotten Jim's away to wed ? You're not that dull.

EZRA. We cannot all be needles :
And some folks' tongues are sharper than their wits.
Yet, till thon spirt of hot tar blinded me,
No chap was cuter in all the countryside
Or better at a bargain ; and it took
A nimble tongue to bandy words with mine.
You'd got to be up betimes to get round Ezra ;
And none was a shrewder judge of ewes, or women.
My wits just failed me once, the day I married :
But you're an early-riser, and your tongue
Is always up before you, and with an edge
Unblunted by the dewfall, and as busy
As a scythe in the grass at Lammas. So Jim's away

To wed, is he, the limb ? I thought he'd gone
 For swedes ; though now I mind some babblement
 About a wedding : but nowadays words tumble
 Through my old head like turnips through a slicer ;
 And naught I ken who the bowdykite's to wed—
 Some bletherskite he's picked up in a ditch,
 Some fond fligary flirtigig, clarty-fine,
 Who'll turn a slattern shrew and a cap-river
 Within a week, if I ken aught of Jim :

Unless . . . Nay, sure, 'twas Judith Ellershaw. . . .

ELIZA. No, no ; you're dull indeed. It's Phoebe Martin.

EZRA. Who's Phoebe Martin ? I ken naught of her.

ELIZA. And I but little.

EZRA. Some trapsing tatterwallops,
 I'll warrant. Well, these days the lads are like
 The young cock-grouse who doesn't consult his dad
 Before he mates. In my—yet, come to think,
 I didn't say overmuch. My dad and mammy
 Scarce kenned her name when I sprung my bride on them—
 Just loosed on them a gisseypig out of a poke
 They'd heard no squeak of. They'd to thole my choice,
 Lump it or like it. I'd the upper hand then,
 And well they kenned their master. No tawse to chide
 Nor apron strings to hold young Ezra then :
 His turn had come, and he was cock of the midden ;
 And no young cockerel's hustled him from it yet,
 For all their crowing. The blind old bird's still game.
 They've never had his spirit, the young cheepers,
 Not one ; and Jim's the lave of the clutch ; and he
 Will never lord it at Krindlesyke till I'm straked.
 But this what's-her-name the gaby's bringing . . .

ELIZA.

Phoebe.

EZRA. A posical name—I never heard the like.
 She'll be a flighty faggit, mark my words.

ELIZA. She's only been here once before ; and now
 She'll be here all the time. I'll find it strange
 With another woman in the house—needs must
 Get used to it. Your mother found it strange
 Likely. . . . It's my turn now, and long in coming.
 Perhaps that makes it harder. I've got set
 Like a vane when the wind's blown east so long, it's clogged
 With dust and cannot whisk with the chopping breeze.

'Twill need a wrench to shift my bent ; for change
Comes sore and difficult at my time of life.

EZRA. Ay, you may find your nose put out of joint
If she's a spirited wench.

ELIZA. Due east it's blown
Since your mother died. She barely outlived my coming,
And never saw a grandchild. I wonder . . . Yet
I spared her all I could. Ay, that was it—
She couldn't abide to watch me trying to spare her,
Another woman doing her work, finoodling
At jobs she'd do so smartly, tidying her hearth,
Using her oven, washing her cups and saucers,
Scouring her tables, redding up her rooms,
Handling her treasures, and wearing out her gear.
And now another wringing out my dishclout
And going about my jobs in her own fashion,
Turning my household, likely, howthery-towthery,
While I sit mum. But it takes forty years'
Steady east wind to teach some folk, and then
They're over-dried to profit by their learning. . . .
And so without a complaint, and keeping her secrets,
Your mother died, with patient, quizzical eyes,
Half-pitying, fixed on mine ; and, dying, left
Krindlesyke and its gear to its new mistress.

EZRA. A woman, she was. You've never had her hand
At farls and bannocks ; and her singing-hinnies
Fair melted in the mouth—not sad and soggy
As yours are like to be. She'd no habnab
And hitty-missy ways ; and she'd turn to
At shearing-time and clip with any man.
She never spared herself.

ELIZA. And died at forty.
As white and worn as an old table-cloth,
Darned, washed and ironed to a shred of cobweb,
Past mending—while your father was sixty-nine
Before he could finish himself, soak as he might.

EZRA. Don't you abuse my father. A man, he was—
No fonder of his glass than a man should be.
Few like him now—I've not his guts, and Jim's
Just a lamb's head, gets half-cocked on a thimble,
And mortal swilling an eggcupful ; a gill
Would send him randy, reeling to the gallows.

The snaffle till he's tewed. I've kenned that look
In women's eyes, and mares', though with a difference.
And Jim—yet she seemed fond enough of Jim :
His daffing's likely fresh to her, though his jokes
Are last week's butter—last week's !—for forty year
I've tholed them, all twice-borrowed, from dad and granddad,
And rank when I came to Krindlesyke, to find
Life, the same job and the same jests over and over.

EZRA. A notion, that, to hatch full-fledged and crowing !
You must have brooded, old clocker.

ELIZA. True enough,
Marriage means little more than a new gown
To some : but Phoebe's not a fancicle tauntril
With fingers itching to hansel new-fangled flerds.
Why she'd wed . . .

EZRA. Tuts ! Girls take their chance. And you'd
Conceit enough of Jim at one time—proud
As a pipit that's hatched a cuckoo : and if the gowk
Were half as handsome as I—you ken yourself,
You needed no coaxing : I wasted little breath
Whistling to heel : you came at the first " Isca ! "

ELIZA. Who kens what a lass runs away from, crazed to
quit
Home at all hazards, little realising
It's life itself she's trying to escape,
And plodging deeper.

EZRA. Trust a wench for kenning.
I've to meet the wife who'd be a maid again :
Once in the fire, no wife, though she may crackle
On the live coals, leaps back to the frying-pan.
It's against nature.

ELIZA. Maybe, and yet somehow
Phoebe seemed different.

EZRA. I've found little difference
Betwixt one gimmer and another gimmer
When the ram's among them. But where does she hail from ?

ELIZA. Allendale way. Jim met her at Martinmas fair.

EZRA. We met . . .

ELIZA. Ay, fairs have much to answer for.

EZRA. I thought 'twas Judith Ellershaw.

ELIZA. God forbid
'Twas Judith I'd to share with—though Jim fancied

The lass at one time. He's had many fancies :
Light come, light go, it's always been with Jim.

EZRA. And I was gay when I was young—as brisk
As a yearling tup with the ewes, till I'd the pains
Like red-hot iron clamping back and thighs.
My heart's a younker's still ; but even love
Gives in at last to rheumatics and lumbago.
Now I'm no better than an old bell-wether,
A broken-winded hirpling tattyjack
That can do nothing but baa and baa and baa.
I'd just to whistle for a wench at Jim's age :
And Jim's . . .

ELIZA. His father's son.

EZRA. He's never had
My spirit. No woman's ever bested me.
For all his bluster, he's a gaumless nowt,
With neither guts nor gall. He just butts blindly—
A woolly-witted ram, bashing his horns
And spattering his silly brains out on a rock :
No backbone—any trollop could twiddle him
Round her little finger : just the sort a doxy
Or a drop too much sets dancing, heels in air :
He's got the gallows' brand. But none of your sons
Has a head for whisky or wenches ; and not one
Has half my spunk, my relish. I'd not trust
Their judgement of a ewe, let alone a woman :
But I could size a wench up at a glance ;
And Judith . . .

ELIZA. Ay, but Krindlesyke would be
A muck-heap-lie-on with that cloffy slut
For mistress. But she flitted one fine night.

EZRA. Rarely the shots of the flock turn lowpy-dyke—
Likelier the tops have the spunk to run ramrace ;
And I think no worse . . .

ELIZA. Her father turned her out,
'Twas whispered ; and he's never named her since ;
And no one's heard a word. I couldn't thole
The lass. She'd big cow-eyes : there's little good
In that sort. Jim's well shot of her ; he'll not
Hear tell of her : that sort can always find
Another man to fool : they don't come back :
Past's past with them.

EZRA. I liked . . .

ELIZA. Ay, your Jim's dad.
But now he's settling down, happen I'll see
Bairn's bairns at Krindlesyke before I die.
Six sons—and only the youngest of the bunch
Left in the old home to do his parents credit.

EZRA. Queer all went wild, your sons, like colliers bitten
With a taste for mutton bleeding hot. Cold lead
Cures dogs of that kidney, peppering them one fine night
From the chink of a stell; but when they're two-legged curs
They've a longer run; and in the end the gallows
Don't noose them, kicking and squealing like snarled rabbits,
Dead-certain as 'twould do in the good old days.

ELIZA. You can crack your gallows-jokes on your own
sons?
And each the spit of the father that drove them wild
With cockering them and cursing them—one moment
Fooling them to their bent, the moment after
Flogging them senseless till their little bodies
Were one blue bruise.

EZRA. I never larruped enough,
But let the varmints off too easily:
That was the mischief. They should have had my dad—
An arm like a bullock-walloper, and a fist
Could fell a stot; and faiks, but he welted me
Skirlnaked, yarked my hurdies till I yollered,
In season and out, and made me the man I am.
Ay, he'd have garred the young eels squirm.

ELIZA. And yet,
My sons as well, though I lost my hold on each
Almost before he was off my lap, with you
To egg them on against me. Peter went first:
And Jim's the lave. But he may settle down.
God kens where you'd be if you'd not wed young.

EZRA. And the devil where you'd be, if we hadn't met
That hiring-day at Hexham, and on the minute.
I'd spent last hiring with another wench,
A giggling, red-haired besom, and we were trysted
To meet at the Shambles; and I was awaiting her
When I caught the glisk of your eye: but she was late;
And you were a sonsy lassie, fresh and pink—
Though little pink about you now I'd fancy.

ELIZA. Nay, forty year of Krindlesyke and all !

EZRA. Young carroty-pow must have been in a fine fantigue
When she found I'd mizzled. Yet, if she'd turned up
In time, poor mealy-face, for all your roses,
You'd never have clapped eyes on Krindlesyke :
This countryside and you would still be strangers.

ELIZA. In time !

EZRA. A narrow squeak.

ELIZA. If she'd turned up

The red-haired girl had lived at Krindlesyke

Instead of me this forty year, and I—

I might . . . But we must dree our weird. And yet,

To think what my life might have been if only—

The difference !

EZRA. Ay, and hers, if “ ifs and ans ” !

But I'm none certain she'd have seen it either.

I could have had her without wedding her,

And no mistake, the nickering red-haired baggage.

Though she was merry, she'd big rabbit-teeth

Might prove gey ill to live with—ay, and a swarm

Of little sandy moppies like their doe,

Buck-teeth and freckled noses and saucer-eyes,

Gaping and squealing round the table at dinner,

And calling me their dad, as likely as not :

Though little her mug would matter, now I'm blind ;

And by this there'll scarce be a stump in her yellow gums,

And not a red hair to her nodding poll—

That shock of flame, a shrivelled, grizzled wisp

Like bracken after a heath-fire ; that creamy skin,

Like a plucked hen's. But she'd a merry eye,

The giglet, and that copper top of hers

Was good to think on of a nippy morning :

While you—but you were young then . . .

ELIZA. Young and daft.

EZRA. Nay, not so gite ; for I was handsome then.

ELIZA. Ay, the braw birkie of that gairishon

Of menseless slubberdegullions ; and I trusted

My eyes and other people's tongues in those days :

And you'd a tongue to glaver a guff of a girl,

The devil's own ; and whatever's gone from you,

You've still a tongue, though with a difference :

Now it's all edge.

EZRA. The knife that spreads the butter
Will slice the loaf. But it's sharper than my teeth.

ELIZA. Ay, tongues cut deeper than any fang can bite,
Sore-rankling wounds.

EZRA. You talk of tongues ! I'm deaf :
 But, for my sins, I cannot be deaf to yours,
 Nattering me into my grave ; and likely your words
 Will flaffer about my lugs like channering peesweeps
 When I lie cold.

ELIZA. Yes, I was young, and agape
For your wheedling flum till it fleeced myself from me.
There's something in a young girl seems to work
Against her better sense and gives her up
Almost in spite of her.

EZRA. It's nature.

ELIZA. Then
Nature has more than enough to answer for.
Young, ay ! and you as gallant as the stallion,
With ribboned tail and mane, that pranced to the crack
Of my father's whip, when first I saw you gaping,
Kenspeckle in that clamjamfrey of copers.

EZRA. Love at first sight !

ELIZA. And I was just as foolish
As you were braw.

EZRA. Well, we'd our time of it,
 Fools or no fools. And you could laugh in those days,
 And didn't snigger like the ginger fizgig.
 Your voice was a bird's : but you laugh little now ;
 And—well maybe your voice is still a bird's.
 There's birds and birds. Then, 'twas a cushy-doo's
 That's brooding on her nest, while the red giglet's
 Was a gowk's at the end of June. Do you call to mind
 We sat the livelong day in a golden carriage,
 Squandering a fortune, forby the tanner I dropped ?
 They wouldn't stop to let me pick it up ;
 And when we alighted from the roundabout
 Some skunk had pouched it : may he pocket it
 Red-hot in hell through all eternity !
 If I'd that fortune safe now in my kist !
 But I was a scatterpenny ; and you were bonnie—
 Pink as a dog-rose were your plump cheeks then ;
 And your hair'd the gloss and colour of clean straw :

EZRA. I cannot catch a note :
 I'm getting old, and deaved as well as darkened.
 When I was young I liked to hear the whaup
 Calling to one another down the slacks :
 And I could whistle too like any curlew.
 'Twas an ancient bird wouldn't answer my call : and now
 I'm ancient myself—an old blind doddering heron,
 Dozing his day out in a syke, while minnows
 Play tiggy round his shanks and nibble his toes ;
 And the hawk hangs overhead. But then the blood
 Was hot, and I'd a relish—such a relish !
 Keen as a kestrel . . . and now . . .

ELIZA. It's Jim and Phoebe—
 The music and the dazzle in their heads :
 And they'll be here . . .

EZRA. I wish he'd married Judith :
 She's none the worse for being a ruddled ewe.

ELIZA. Nay, God forbid ! At least I'm spared that bildert.

(EZRA rises ; and ELIZA carries out his chair, and he
 hobbles after her. She soon returns and puts the griddle-
 cakes into the oven to keep hot. Presently a step is heard
 on the threshold, and JUDITH ELLERSHAW stands in the
 doorway, a baby in her arms. ELIZA does not notice her
 for a few moments ; then, glancing up, recognises her
 with a start.)

ELIZA. You, Judith Ellershaw ! I thought 'twas Jim.

JUDITH. You thought 'twas Jim ?

ELIZA. Jim and . . . To think it's you !
 Where've you sprung from ? It's long since you've shown face
 In these parts ; and we'd seen the last of you,
 I reckoned, little dreaming—and least of all
 To-day !

JUDITH. And should I be more welcome then
 On any other ?

ELIZA. Welcome ? I hardly know.
 Decent folk don't keep open house for your sort
 At any time. Your foot's not dirtied that doorstone
 A dozen times in your life—and then to come
 To-day of all days, just when Jim . . .

(Breaks off abruptly.)

JUDITH. When Jim ?

ELIZA. But don't stand there. You're looking pale and peaked.

It's heavy, traiking the fell-tracks with a baby :
 Come in and rest a moment if you're tired.
 You cannot bide here long ; I'm sorry, lass ;
 But I'm expecting company ; and you
 Yourself, I take it, won't be over-eager
 For company.

JUDITH. I'm tired enough, God kens—
 Bone-weary : but we'll not stay long to shame you ;
 And you can send us packing in good time
 Before your company comes.

(She enters and seats herself on a chair near the door.

*ELIZA busies herself laying the table for tea, and there is
 silence for a while.)*

JUDITH. And so Jim's gone
 To fetch the company ?

ELIZA. Ay, Jim has gone . . .

*(She breaks off again abruptly, and says no more for a while.
 Presently she goes to the oven, takes out a griddle-cake,
 splits and butters it, and hands it to JUDITH.)*

ELIZA. Likely you're hungry and could do with a bite ?

JUDITH *(taking it)*. I'm famished. Cake ! We're grand
 to-day indeed !

And scones and bannocks—carties, what a spread !
 It's almost like a wedding.

ELIZA. A wedding, woman ?

Can't folk have scones and bannocks and singing-hinnies
 But you must prate of weddings—you and all !

JUDITH. I meant no harm. I thought perhaps Jim might . . .
 Though doubtless he was married long ago ?

*(ELIZA does not answer. JUDITH'S baby begins to whimper,
 and she tries to hush it in an absent manner.)*

JUDITH. Whisht, whisht, my little lass ! You mustn't cry,
 And shame the ears of decent folk. Whisht, whisht !

ELIZA. Why, that's no way to hush the teelytoon.
 Come, give the bairn to me. Come, woman, come !

(Taking the child from JUDITH.)

I'll show you how to handle babies. There !

JUDITH. And you would nurse my brat ?

ELIZA.

A bairn's a bairn—

Ay, even though its mother . . .

*(Breaks off abruptly, and stands gazing before her, clasping
 the baby to her bosom.)*

JUDITH. Why don't you finish?
Ay, even though its mother . . . you were saying.

ELIZA. It's ill work, calling names.

JUDITH. You needn't fear
 To make me blush by calling me any name
 That hasn't stung me to the quick already.
 My pious father had a holy tongue,
 And he had searched the Scriptures to some purpose.

ELIZA (*gazing before her in an abstracted manner*).
 Ay, likely enough. . . . Poor bairn, poor little bairn—
 It's strange but, as you snuggled to my breast,
 I could have fancied a moment 'twas Jim I held
 In my arms again. I'm growing old and foolish
 To have such fancies.

JUDITH. Fancied 'twas Jim, your son—
 My bastard brat?

ELIZA. Shame on you, woman, to call
 Your own bairn such, poor innocent. It's not
 To blame for being a chance-bairn. Yet . . . O Jim!

JUDITH. Why do you call on Jim? He's not come home yet?
 But I must go before your son comes back.
 Give me the bairn.

ELIZA (*withholding the baby*). Nay, daughter, not till I learn
 The father's name.

JUDITH. What right have you . . .

ELIZA. God kens. . . .
 And yet . . .

JUDITH. Give me the bairn. You'll never learn
 The father's name from me.

ELIZA. Go, daughter, go.
 What ill-chance made you come to-day of all days?

JUDITH. Why not to-day? Come, woman, I'd ken that
 Before I go. I've half a mind to stay.

ELIZA. Nay, lass, you said . . .

JUDITH. I've said a lot in my time.
 I've changed my mind. 'Twas Jim I came to see—
 Though why, God kens! I liked the singing-hinny:
 Happen there'll be some more for me if I stay.
 I find I cannot thrive on nettle-broth:
 And it's not every day . . .

ELIZA. Judith, you ken.

JUDITH. Ken? I ken nothing but what you tell me.

ELIZA. Daughter,
I'll tell you all. You'll never have the heart . . .

JUDITH. The heart !

ELIZA. The heart to stay and shame us when you ken all.

JUDITH. All ?

ELIZA. When you talked of weddings you'd hit the truth :
And Jim brings home his bride to-day. Even now . . .

JUDITH. And Jim brings home . . .

ELIZA. I looked for them by this :
But you've still time . . .

JUDITH. The bride comes home to-day.
Brides should come home : it's right a man should bring
His bride home—ay ! And we must go, my wean,
To spare her blushes. We're no company
For bride and bridegroom. Happen we should meet them,
You must not cry to him, I must not lift
My eyes to his. We're nothing now to him.
Your cry might tell her heart too much—my eyes
Might meet her eyes and tell . . . It isn't good
For a bride to know too much : so we must hide
In the ditch as they pass by, if we should chance
To meet them on the road—their road and ours,
The same road, though we're travelling different ways.
The bride comes home. Brides come home every day.
And you and I . . .

ELIZA. There's nothing else for it.

JUDITH. There's nothing else ?

ELIZA. Nay, lass ! How could you bide ?
They'll soon . . . But you'll not meet them if you go . . .

JUDITH. Go where ?

ELIZA. And how should I ken where you're
bound for ?

I thought you might be making home.

JUDITH. Home—home !
I might be making home ? And where's my home—

Ay, and my bairn's home, if it be not here ?

ELIZA. Here ? You'd not stay ?

JUDITH. Why not ? Have I no right ?

ELIZA. If you'll not go for my sake, go for Jim's.
If you were fond . . .

JUDITH. And think you I'd be here
If I had not been fond of Jim ? And yet,

Why should I spare him ? He's not spared me much,
Who gave him all a woman has to give.

ELIZA. But think of her, his bride, and her home-coming.

JUDITH. I'll go.

ELIZA. You lose but little : too well I ken
How little—I who've dwelt this forty year
At Krindlesyke.

JUDITH. Happen you never loved.

ELIZA. I too was young once, daughter.

JUDITH. Ay, and yet
You've never tramped the road I've had to travel.
God send it stretch not forty year !

ELIZA. I've come
That forty year. We're on the selfsame road,
The three of us, but she's the stoniest bit
To travel still—the bride just setting out
And stepping daintily down the lilylea.
We've known the worst.

JUDITH. But she can keep the highway,
While I must slink in the ditch among the nettles.

ELIZA. I've kept the hard road, daughter, forty year :
The ditch may be easier going after all :
Nettles don't sting each other.

JUDITH. Nay, but I'm not
A ditch-born nettle, but, among the nettles,
Only a woman naked to every sting :
And there are slugs and slithery toads and paddocks
In the ditch-bottom ; and their slimy touch
Is worse to bear than any nettle . . .

ELIZA. Ay—
The pity of it ! A maid blooms only once—
And then, that a man should ruin . . . But you've your bairn ;
And bairns, while we can hold them safe in our arms
And they still need the breast, make up for much ;
For there's a kind of comfort in their clinging,
Though they only cling till they can stand alone.
But yours is not a son. If I'd only had
One daughter . . .

JUDITH. Well, you'll have a daughter now.
But we must go our way to—God kens where !
Before Jim brings the bride home. You've your wish—
Jim brings you home a daughter . . .

He hasn't lost much time, has Jim, the dog !
 Come, let me take it, daughter. I've never held
 A grandchild in my arms. Six sons I've had,
 But not one's made me granddad to my knowledge :
 And all the hoggerels have turned lowpy-dyke
 And scrambled, follow-my-leader, over the crag's edge,
 But Jim, your husband—and not for me to say
 Before his wife that he's the draft of the flock.
 Give me the baby : I'll not let it fall :
 I've always had a way with bairns, and women.
 It's not for naught I've tended ewes and lambs
 This sixty year.

(He snatches the baby from JUDITH before she realises what he is doing, and hobbles away with it to the high-backed settle by the fire, out of sight. Before JUDITH can move to follow him, steps are heard on the threshold.)

ELIZA. Ah God ! They're at the door !

(As she speaks JIM and PHOEBE BARRASFORD enter, talking and laughing. JUDITH ELLERSHAW shrinks into the shadow behind the door, while they come between her and the settle on which EZRA is nursing the baby unseen. ELIZA stands dazed in the middle of the room.)

JIM. And they lived happy ever afterwards,
 Eh, lass ? Well, mother, I've done the trick : all's over ;
 And I'm a married man, copt fair and square,
 Coupled to Phoebe, and I've brought her home.
 You call the lass to mind, though you look moidert ?
 What's dozzened you ? She'll find her wits soon, Phoebe :
 They're in a mullock, all turned howthery-towthery
 At the notion of a new mistress at Krindlesyke—
 She'll come to her senses soon and bid you welcome.
 Take off your bonnet and make yourself at home.
 I trust tea's ready, mother : I'm fairly famished ;
 I've hardly had a bite, and not a sup
 To wet my whistle since forenoon—and dod !
 But getting married is gey hungry work.
 I'm hollow as kex in a ditch-bottom,
 And just as dry as Molly Miller's milk-pail
 She bought on the chance of borrowing a cow.
 Eh, Phoebe lass ! But you've stopped laughing, have you ?
 And you look fleyed—there's nothing here to scare you :
 We're quiet folk at Krindlesyke. Come, mother,

Have you no word of welcome for the lass,
 That you gape like a foundered ewe at us? What ghost
 Has given you a gliff and set you chittering?
 Come, shake yourself before I rax your bones,
 And give my bride the welcome due to her—
 My bride, the lady I have made my wife.
 Poor lass, she's quaking like a dothery-dick.

ELIZA (*to PHOEBE*). Daughter, may you . . .

EZRA (*crooning, unseen, to the baby*).

Dance for your mammy,

Dance for your daddy. . . .

JIM.

What ails the old runt now?

You must not heed him, Phoebe, lass—he's blind
 And old and watty, but there's no harm in him.

(*Goes towards the settle.*)

Come, dad, and jog your wits and stir your stumps,
 And welcome . . . What the devil's this? Whose brat . . .

EZRA. Whose brat? And who should ken—although they say
 It's a wise father knows his own child. Ay!

If he's the devil, you're the devil's brat,
 And I'm the devil's daddy. Happen you came
 Before the parson had time to read the prayers.
 But he's a rum dad . . .

(JUDITH ELLERSHAW *steps forward to take the child from*
 EZRA.)

JIM.

Judith Ellershaw!

Why, lass, where ever have . . .

(*He steps towards her, then stops in confusion. Nobody speaks as JUDITH goes towards the settle, takes the child from EZRA and wraps it in her shawl. She is moving to the door when PHOEBE steps before her and closes it, then turns and faces JUDITH.*)

PHOEBE.

You shall not go.

JUDITH. And who are you to stop me? Come, make way—
 Come, woman, let me pass.

PHOEBE.

I—I'm Jim's bride.

JUDITH. And what should Jim's bride have to say to me?
 Come, let me by.

PHOEBE.

You shall not go.

JUDITH.

Come, lass.

You do not ken me for the thing I am:

If you but guessed, you'd fling the door wide open,

And draw your petticoats about you tight
Lest any drabble-tail of mine should smutch them.
I never should have come 'mid decent folk :
I never should have crawled out of the ditch.
You little' ken . . .

PHOEBE. I heard your name. I've heard
That name before.

JUDITH. You heard no good of it,
Whoever spoke.

PHOEBE. I heard it from the lips
That uttered it just now.

JUDITH. From Jim's ? Well, Jim
Kens what I am. I wonder he lets you talk
With me. Come . . .

PHOEBE. Not until I know the name
Of your baby's father.

JUDITH. You've no right to ask.

PHOEBE. Maybe, and yet you shall not cross that door-sill
Until I know.

JUDITH. Come, woman, don't be foolish.

PHOEBE. You say I've no right. Pray God you speak the truth:
But there may be no woman in the world
Who has a better right.

JUDITH. You'd never heed
A doting dabby's blethering, would you, lass—
An old blind, crazy creature . . .

PHOEBE. If I've no right,
You'll surely never have the heart to keep
The name from me ? You'll set my mind at ease ?

JUDITH. The heart ! If it will set your mind at ease,
I'll speak my shame . . . I'll speak my shame right out . . .
I'll speak my shame right out before you all.

JIM. But, lass !

ELIZA (to PHOEBE). Nay, let her go. You're young and hard
And I was hard, though not so young—I've long
Been growing old, though little I realised
How old, and when you're old you don't judge hardly—
You ken things happen in spite of us, willy-nilly.
We think we're safe, holding the reins, and then
In a flash the mare bolts, and the wheels fly off,
And we're lying stunned beneath the broken cart.
So let the lass go quietly, and keep

Your happiness. When you're old you'll not let slip
 A chance of happiness so easily :
 There's not so much of it going, to pick and choose—
 The apple's speckled, but it's best to munch it
 And get what relish out of it you can ;
 And one day you'll be glad to chew the core—
 For all its bitterness, few chuck it from them
 While they've a sense left that can savour aught.
 So let the lass go. You may have the right
 To question her, but folk who stand on their rights
 Get little rest—they are on a quaking moss
 Without a foothold, and find themselves to the neck
 In Deadman's Flow before they've floundered far.
 Rights go for little in this life : few are worth
 The risk of losing peace and quiet. You'll have
 Plenty to worrit and keep you wakeful, without
 A pillow stuffed with burrs and briars : so take
 An old wife's counsel, daughter—let well alone,
 And don't go gathering grievances. The lass . . .

JIM. Ay, don't be hard on her. Though mother's old
 She talks sense whiles. So let the poor lass go.

JUDITH. The father of my bairn . . .

JIM.

She's lying, Phoebe !

JUDITH. The father of my bairn is—William Burn,
 A stranger to these parts. Now let me pass.

*(She tries to slip by, but PHOEBE still does not make way
 for her.)*

JIM. Ay, Phoebe, let her go. She tells the truth.
 I thought . . . But I mistook her. Let her go.
 I never reckoned you'd be a reesty nag :
 Yet you can set your hoofs and champ your bit
 With any mare I see. I doubt you'll prove
 A rackle ramstam wife if you've your head.
 She's answered what you asked—though why, unless . . .
 Well, I don't blame the wench : she should ken best.

PHOEBE. Judith, you lie.

JUDITH.

I lie ! You mean . . .

PHOEBE.

To-day

I married your bairn's father.

ELIZA.

O God !

JIM.

Come, lass,

I say !

JUDITH. No, woman, no ! I spoke the truth.
Haven't I shamed myself enough already—
That you must call me liar ! (*To ELIZA*) Speak out now,
If you're not tongue-tied : tell her all you ken—
How I'm a byword among honest women,
And yet no liar. You'd tongue enough just now
To tell me what I was—a cruel tongue
Cracking about my ears : and have you none
To answer your son's wife and save the lad
From scandal ?

ELIZA. I've not known the lass to lie . . .
And she's the true heart, Phoebe, true as death,
Whatever it may seem.

JIM. That's that : and so . . .

(While they have been talking, EZRA has risen from the settle unnoticed, and has hobbled to where PHOEBE and JUDITH confront one another. He suddenly touches PHOEBE'S arm.)

EZRA. Cackling like guinea-fowl when a hawk's in air !
I must have snoozed—yet I caught the gabble. There'll be
A clatter all day now with two women's tongues,
Clack-clack against each other, in the house—
Two pendulums in one clock. Lucky I'm deaf.
But I remember—give me back the bairn.
Nay, this is not the wench. I want Jim's bride—
The mother of his daughter. Judith, lass,
Where are you ? Come, I want to nurse my grandchild—
Jim's little lass.

ELIZA (*stepping towards EZRA*). Come, hold your foolish tongue.
You don't know what you're saying. Come, sit down.

(Leads him back to the settle.)

JIM. If he don't stop his yammer, I'll slit his weasen—
I'll wring his neck for him !

EZRA. What's wrong ? What's wrong ?
I'm an old man now, and must do as I'm bid like a bairn—
I who was master and did all the bidding.
And you, Jim, I'd have broken your back like a rabbit's
At one time if you'd talked to me like that.
But now I'm old and sightless ; and any tit
May chivvy a blind kestrel. Ay, I'm old
And weak—so waffly in arms and shanks, that now
I couldn't even hold down a hog to be clipped :

So boys can threaten me, and go unskelped,
 So you can bray, and I must hold my peace :
 Yet, mark my words, the hemp's ripe for the rope
 That'll throttle you one day, you gallows-bird.
 But something's happening that a blind man's sense
 Cannot take hold of ; so I'd best be quiet—
 Ay, just sit still all day, and nod and nod
 Until I nod myself into my coffin :
 That's all that's left me.

JUDITH (*to* PHOEBE). You'd weigh an old man's gossip
 Against my word ? O woman, pay no heed
 To idle tongues if you'd keep happiness.

PHOEBE. While the tongue lies, the eyes speak out the truth.

JUDITH. The eyes ? Then you'll not take my word for it,
 But let a dotard's clatterjaw destroy you ?
 You ken my worth—yet, if you care for Jim,
 You'll trust his oath. If he denies the bairn,
 Then you'll believe ? You'd surely never doubt
 Your husband's word, and on your wedding-day ?
 Small wonder you'd be duberous of mine.
 But Jim's not my sort—he's an honest lad,
 And he'll speak truly. If he denies the bairn . . .

PHOEBE. I've not been used to doubting people's word.
 My father's daughter couldn't but be trustful
 Of what men said—for he was truth itself.
 If only he'd lived, I mightn't . . .

JUDITH. If Jim denies . . .

PHOEBE. If Jim can look me in the eyes and swear . . .

JUDITH. Come, set her mind at ease. Don't spare me, Jim ;
 But look her in the eyes and tell her all ;
 For she's your wife, and has a right to ken
 The bairn's no bairn of yours. Come, lad, speak out,
 And don't stand gaping. You ken as well as I
 The bairn . . . Speak ! Speak ! Have you no tongue at all ?

(*She pauses ; but JIM hesitates to speak.*)

Don't think of me. You've naught to fear from me.
 Tell all you ken of me right out : no word
 Of yours can hurt me now : I'm shameless now—
 I'm in the ditch, and spattered to the neck.
 Come, don't mince matters : your tongue's not so modest
 It fears to make your cheek burn—I ken that ;
 And, when the question is a woman's virtue,

It rattles like a reaper round a wheatfield,
And as little cares if it's cutting grain or poppies.
So it's too late to blush and stammer now
And let your teeth trip up your tongue. Speak out !

(JIM *still hesitates.*)

Your wife is waiting. If you don't tell her true,
And quick about it, it's your own look-out.
I wouldn't be in your shoes anyway.
See how she's badgered me ; and all because . . .
Come, be a man, and speak.

JIM. The brat's no brat
Of mine, Phoebe, I swear . . .

(*He stops in confusion, dropping his eyes. PHOEBE turns from him, and lays one hand on the latch and the other on JUDITH'S arm.*)

PHOEBE. Come, lass, it's time
We were getting home.

JUDITH. We ?

PHOEBE. Ay, unless you'd stay ?
You've the right.

JUDITH. I stay ? O God, what have I done !
That I'd not crossed the threshold !

ELIZA. You're not going
To leave him, Phoebe ? You cannot : you're his wife,
And cannot quit . . . But I'm getting too old . . .

JIM. Leave me ?
Leave me ? She's mad ! I never heard the like—
And on my wedding-day—stark staring mad !
But I'm your husband ; and I bid you bide.

PHOEBE. O Jim, if you had only told the truth,
I might, God knows—for I was fond of you,
And trusted . . .

JIM. Now you're talking sense. Leave me—
And married to me in a church and all !
But that's all over, and you're not huffed now ?
There's naught in me to take a scunner at.
Yet the shying filly may prove a steady mare
Once a man's astriddle her who'll stand no capers.
You've got to let a woman learn who's master
Sooner or later : so it's just as well
To get it over once and for all. That's that.
And now, let Judith go. Come, Phoebe, lass ;

I thought you'd a tender heart. Don't be too hard
On a luckless wench ; but let bygones be bygones.
All's well that ends well. And what odds, my lass,
Even if the brat were mine ?

PHOEBE. Judith, you're ready ?

JIM. Let the lass bide and sup with us. I'll warrant
She'll not say nay : she's a peckish look, as though
She'd tasted no singing-hinnies this long while back.
Mother, another cup. Draw up your chairs.
We've not a wedding-party every day
At Krindlesyke. I'm ravenous as a squab
When some one's potted dad and mammy crow.
So sit down, Phoebe, before I clear the board.

PHOEBE. Judith, it's time we were getting home.

JUDITH. Home, lass ?
I've got no home : I've long been homeless : I . . .

PHOEBE. That much he told me about you : he spoke the truth
So far at least : but I have still a home.
My mother will be glad to see me back—
Ay, more than glad : she was loth to let me go,
Though, trusting Jim as she trusted every one,
She said but little : and she'll welcome you
If only for your baby's sake. She's just
A child with children. Unless you are too proud . . .
Nay ! But I see you'll come. We'll live and work
And tend the bairn as sisters, we who care.
Come, Judith.

(She throws the door wide open and goes out, without looking back. JIM steps forward to stop her, but halts bewildered on the threshold, and stands gazing after her.)

JIM. I'm damned ! Nay, lass, I bid you bide :
I'd see you straked before I'd let you go. . . .
Do you hear, I bid . . . The blasted wench—she's gone—
Gone ! I've a mind . . . If I don't hang for her . . .
Just let me get my fingers . . . But I'm betwattled
Like a stoorded tup ! And this is my wedding-day !

(He stands speechless, but at length turns to JUDITH, who is gazing after PHOEBE with an unrealising stare.)

JIM. Well . . . anyway, you'll not desert me, Judith.
Old friends are best : and I—I always liked you.
The other lass was a lamb to woo, but wed,
A termagant ; and I'm well shot of her.

I'd have wrung the pullet's neck for her one day
 If she'd—and the devil to pay ! So it's a good riddance . . .
 Yet she'd a way with her, she had, the filly !
 And I'd have relished breaking her in. But you
 Were always easygoing, and fond of me—
 Ay, fond and faithful. Look how you stood up
 To her, the tawpy tauntril, for my sake !
 We'll let bygones be bygones, won't we, Judith ?
 My chickens have come home to roost, it seems.
 And so this is my baby ? Who'd have dreamt . . .
 I little looked to harvest my wild oats.

[JUDITH *starts, shrinking from JIM ; and then, clutching
 the baby to her bosom, she goes quickly out of the door.*

JUDITH. I'm coming, Phoebe, coming home with you !

(JIM *stands on the doorstep, staring after her dumbfounded,
 till she is out of sight ; then he turns and clashes the door
 to.*)

ELIZA. Ay, but it's time to bar the stable-door.

JIM. I've done with women : they're a faithless lot.

EZRA. I can't make head or tail of all the wrangling—
 Such a gillaber and gilravishing
 As I never heard in all my born days, never.
 Weddings were merrymakings in my time :
 The reckoning didn't come till the morrow's morn.
 But, Jim, my boy, though you're a baa-waa body
 And gan about like a goose with a nicked head,
 You've aiblains found out now that petticoats
 Are kittle-cattle, the whole rabblement.
 The reesty nags will neither heck nor gee ;
 And they're all cling-clang like the Yetholm tinkers.
 Ay, though you're just a splurging jackalally,
 You've spoken truth for once, Jim—women folk,
 Wenches and wives, are all just weathercocks.
 I've ever found them faithless, first and last.
 But where's your daughter, Jim ? I want to hold
 The bairn.

JIM. They've taken even her from me.

(ELIZA, *who has been filling the teapot, takes EZRA by the
 hand and leads him to his seat at the table.*)

ELIZA. Come, husband, sup your tea before it's cold :
 And you too, son. Ay, we're a faithless lot.

BOOK II

BELL HAGGARD

*Fire and salt and candle-light,
And Christ receive thy soul!*

LYKE-WAKE DIRGE

BOOK II
BELL HAGGARD

PART I

Midsummer morning. EZRA BARRASFORD sits crouched over the fire. ELIZA BARRASFORD, looking old and worn, and as if dazed by a sudden shock, comes from the ben, or inner room, with a piece of paper in her hand. As she sinks to a chair to recover her breath, the paper flutters to the floor, where she lets it lie, and sits staring before her.

ELIZA. So that's the last.

EZRA. The last? The last of what?

ELIZA. The last of your sons to leave you. Jim's gone now.

EZRA. Gone where, the tyke? After his wife, I'll warrant.

'Twill take him all his time to catch her up:

She's three months' start of him. The gonneril,

To be forsaken on his wedding-day:

And the ninneyhammer let her go—he let her!

Do you reckon I'd let a woman I'd fetched home

Go gallivanting off at her own sweet will?

No wench I'd ringed and had a mind to hold

Should quit the steading till she was carried feet first

And shoulder-high, packed snug in a varnished box.

The noodle couldn't stand up to a woman's tongue:

And so light-heels picked up her skirts and flitted

Before he'd even bedded her—skelped off

Like a ewe turned lowpy-dyke, and left the nowt

The laughing-stock of the countryside. He should

Have used his fists to teach her manners. She seemed

To have the fondy flummoxed, till his wits

Were fozy as a frosted swede. Do you reckon

I'd let a lass . . .

ELIZA. And yet six lads have left you
Without a by-your-leave.

EZRA. Six lads ?

ELIZA. Your sons.

EZRA. Ay . . . but they'd not the spunk to scoot till I
Was blind and crippled. The scurvy rats skedaddled
As the old barn-roof fell in. While I'd my sight
They'd scarce the nerve to look me in the eye,
The slinking, blinking squealers !

ELIZA. Ay, we're old.
The heat this morning seems to suffocate me—
My head's a skep of buzzing bees ; and I pant
Like an old ewe under a dyke when the sun gives scarce
An inch of shade. You harp on sight : but eyes
Aren't everything—my sight's a girl's, and yet
I'm old and broken : you've broken me among you.
I'd count the pens of a hanging hawk, yet my eyes
Have saved me little—they've never seen to the bottom
Of the blackness of men's hearts. The very sons
Of my body, I reckoned to ken through and through,
As every mother thinks she knows her sons,
Have been pitch night to me. We never learn.
I thought I'd got by heart each turn and twist
Of all Jim's stupid cunning ; but even he's
Outwitted me. Six sons, and not one left—
All gone in bitterness, firstborn to reckling—
Peter, twelve years since, that black Christmas Eve ;
And now Jim ends . . .

EZRA. You mean Jim's gone for good ?

ELIZA. For good and all : he's taken Peter's road.

EZRA. And who's to tend the ewes ? He couldn't go—
No herd could leave his sheep to an old wife's care :
For this old carcase, once counted the best herd's
In the countryside, is a useless bag-of-bones now.
Jim couldn't leave . . .

ELIZA. For all I ken or care,
He's taken them with him too.

EZRA. You're hawering !
You're sons aren't common thieves, I trust. And Jim
Would scarce have pluck to sneak a swede from the mulls
Of a hobbled ewe, much less make off with a flock—
Though his forbears lifted a wheen Scots' beasts in their time ;

And Steel would have him by the heels before
 He'd travelled a donkey's gallop, though he skelped along
 Like Willie Pigg's dick-ass. But how do you ken
 The gawky's gone for good? He couldn't leave . . .

ELIZA. I found a paper in the empty chest
 Scrawled with a bit of writing in his hand—
Tell dad I've gone to look for his lost wits ;
And he'll not see me till he gets new eyes
To seek me himself.

EZRA. Eyes or no eyes, I'll break
 The founmart's back, in this world or the next—
 He'll not escape ! He thinks he's the laugh of me ;
 But I've never let another man laugh last.
 Though he should take the short-cut to the gallows,
 I'll have him bibbering on his bended knees
 Before me yet, even if I have to wait
 Till I find him brizzling on the coals of hell.
 But what do you say—the empty chest—what chest ?

ELIZA. The kist beneath the bed.

EZRA. But that's not empty !
 How could you open it when I'd the key
 Strung safely on a bootlace next my skin ?

ELIZA. The key ? You should have chained the kist itself
 As a locket round your neck, if you'd have kept
 Your precious hoard from your own flesh and blood.

EZRA. To think a man begets the thieves to rob him !
 But how . . .

ELIZA. I had no call to open it.
 I caught my foot against the splintered lid
 When I went to make the bed.

EZRA. The splintered lid !
 And the kist—the kist ! You say 'twas empty ?

ELIZA. Not quite :
 The paper was in.

EZRA. But the money, you dam of thieves—
 Where was the money ?

ELIZA. It wasn't in the box—
 Not a brass farthing.

EZRA. The money gone—all gone ?
 Why didn't you tell me about it right away ?

ELIZA. I wasn't minding money : I'd lost a son.

EZRA. A son—a thief ! I'll have the law of him :

I'll sprag his wheel—for all his pretty pace,
 He'll come a cropper yet, the scrunt' wastrel.
 This comes of marrying into a coper's family :
 I might have kenned—thieving runs in their blood.

ELIZA. I've seen the day that lie'd have roused . . . But
 now

It's not worth while . . . worth while. I've never felt
 Such heat—it smothers me : it's like a nightmare
 When you wake with your head in the blankets all asweat—
 Only I cannot wake . . . It snowed the night
 That Peter went . . .

EZRA. Blabbering of heat and snow—
 And all that money gone, my hard-earned savings !
 We're beggared, woman—beggared by your son :
 And then to sit and yammer like a yieldewe :
 Come, stir your stumps and clap your bonnet on—
 Up and away !

ELIZA. And where should I away to ?

EZRA. I'll have the law of him : I'll have him gaoled,
 And you must fetch the peeler.

ELIZA. Policemen throng
 Round Krindlesyke as bees about a thistle !
 And I'm to set the peelers on my son ?
 If he'd gone with Peter they'd have tracked his hobnails . . .
 It snowed that night . . . The snowflakes buzz like bees
 About the prickling thistles in my head—
 Big bumblebees . . . I never felt such heat.

EZRA. And I must sit tied to a chair, and hearken
 To an old wife hawering of bumblebees,
 While my hard-earned sovereigns lie snug and warm
 In the breeches-pocket of a rascal thief—
 Fifty gold sovereigns !

ELIZA. Fifty golden bees—
 Golden Italian queens. . . My father spent
 A sight of money on Italian queens—
 For he'd a way with bees. He'd handle them
 With naked hands. They swarmed on his beard, and hung
 Buzzing like fury ; but he never blinked—
 Just wagged his head, swaying them, till they dropped
 All of a bunch into an upturned skep . . .
 My head's a hive of buzzing bees—bees buzzing
 In the hot crowded darkness, dripping honey . . .

EZRA. You're wandering, woman—maffling like a mad-pash.

Jim's stolen your senses when he took my gold.

ELIZA. Don't talk of money now : I want to think.

Six sons I had. My sons, you say. You're right ;

For men folk have no children—only women

Carry them, only women are brought to bed,

And only women labour ; and, when they go,

Only the mothers lose them—and all for nothing,

The coil and cumber ! if I could have left one son

Wedded and settled down at Krindlesyke

To do his parents credit and carry on . . .

First Peter came : it snowed the night he came—

A feeding-storm of fisselling dry snow.

I lay and watched flakes fleetering out of the dark

In the candle-shine against the wet black glass,

Like moths about a lanthorn . . . I lay and watched

Till the pains were on me. . . . And they buzzed like bees,

The snow-flakes in my head—hot stinging bees . . .

It snowed again, the night he went. . . . In the smother

I lost him, in a drift down Bloodysyke . . .

I couldn't follow farther : the snow closed in—

Dry flakes that stung my face like swarming bees,

And blinded me . . . and buzzing till my head

Was all ahum ; and I was fair betwattled . . .

I've not set eyes . . .

EZRA. Gather your wits together.

There's no one else ; and you must go to Rawridge—

No daundering on the road, and tell John Steel

Jim's gone ; and so there's none to look to the sheep.

He must send some one . . . Though my money melt

In the hot pocket of a vagabond,

They must be minded : sheep can't tend themselves.

ELIZA. I'll go. 'Twas cruel to leave them in this heat

With none to water them. This heat's a judgement . . .

They were my sons : I bore and suckled them—

This heat's a judgement on me, pressing down

On my brain like a red-hot iron . . .

(She rises with difficulty and goes bareheaded into the sunshine. In a few moments she staggers back, and stumbles with unseeing eyes towards the other room. She pauses a second at the door, and turns as if to speak to EZRA ; but

Proud as a thistle ; and a donkey's cropt
 The thistle's prickly pride. Why don't you speak ?
 I'm not mistaken this time : I heard you come :
 I feel you standing over me.

(He pokes round with his stick, catching PETER on the shin with it.)

PETER *(wresting the stick from EZRA'S grasp)*. Easy on !
 Peter's no lad to take a leathering now.
 Your time's come round for breeches down, old boy :
 But don't get scared, for I'm no walloper—
 Too like hard work ! My son's a clean white skin :
 He's never skirled, as you made me. By gox,
 You gave me gip ! My back still bears the stripes
 Of the loundering I got the night I left.
 But I bear no malice, you old bag-of-bones :
 And where's the satisfaction in committing
 Assault and battery on a blasted scarecrow ?
 'Twas basting hot young flesh that you enjoyed :
 I still can hear you smack your lips with relish
 To see the blue weals rising as you laid on
 Until the tawse was bloody. Not juice enough
 In your geyzened carcase to raise one weal ; and I never
 Could bear the sound of cracking bones—and you're
 All nobs and knuckles like the parson's pig.
 To think I feared you once, old spindleshanks !
 But I'm not here for paying compliments :
 I've other pressing business on that brings me
 To the god-forsaken gaol where I was born.
 If I make sense of your doting, mother's out ;
 And that's as well—it makes things easier.
 She'd flutter me : and I like to take things easy,
 Though I'm no sneak—I come in as bold as brass
 By the front, when there's no back door. I'll do the trick
 While she's gone, and borrow a trifle on account.
 I trust that cuddy hasn't cropped your cashbox
 Before your eldest son has got his portion.

(He starts to go towards the inner room, but stops half-way as he hears a step on the threshold.)

PETER. The devil !

(BELL HAGGARD, a tall young tinker woman, with a flame-coloured handkerchief about her head, appears in the door with her young son, MICHAEL.)

PETER. You, Bell? Lass, but you stârtled me.

EZRA (*muttering to himself*).

This must be death : the crows are gathering in.
I don't feel like cold carrion, but corbies will gather
And flesh their bloody beaks on an old ram's carcase
Before the life's quite out.

PETER (*to BELL*). I feared 'twas mother.
Lucky she's out : it's easier to do—
Well, you ken what, when she's . . . But didn't I bid
You keep well out of sight, you and the lad ?

BELL. You did. What then ?

PETER. I thought 'twas better the bairn . . .

BELL. You think too much for a man with a small head—
You'll split the scalp some day. I've not been used
To doing any man's bidding, as you should ken :
And I've a mind to see the marble halls
You dreamt you dwelt in.

PETER. Hearken, how she gammons !

BELL. She—the cat's mother ? You've no manners, Peter :
You haven't introduced us.

PETER. Only hark !
Well, dad, she's Bell—Bell Haggard, tinker-born—
She'll tell you she's blood-royal, likely as not ;
And this lad happens to be hers and mine,
Somehow, though we're not married.

BELL. What a fashion
To introduce a boy to his grandfather—
And such a dear respectable old sheepshead !

(*To MICHAEL*)

Look well on granddad, son, and see what comes
Of minding sheep.

MICHAEL. I mean to be a shepherd.

BELL. Well, you've a knack of getting your own way :
But, tripe and trotters ! you can look on him,
And still say that ? Ay, you're his grandson, surely—
All Barrasford, with not a dash of Haggard,
No drop of the wild colt's blood. Ewe's milk you'd bleed
If your nose were tapped. Who'd ever guess my dugs
Had suckled you ? Even your dad's no more
Than three parts mutton with a strain of reynard—
A fox's heart, for all his weak sheep's head.
Lad, look well round on your ancestral halls :

You'll likely not clap eyes on them again.
 I'm eager to be off : we don't seem welcome.
 Your venerable grandsire is asleep,
 Or else he's a deaf-mute—though likely enough
 That's how folk look awake at Krindlesyke.
 I'd fancied we were bound for The Happy Return,
 But we've landed at The Undertaker's Arms—
 And after closing time and all. You've done
 That little business, Peter—though it's not bulged
 Your pockets overmuch, that I can see ?

PETER. Just setting about it when you interrupted . . .

BELL. Step lively then. I find this welcome too warm
 On such a sultry day : I'm choked for air.
 These whitewashed walls, they're too like—well, you ken
 Where you'll find yourself if you get nobbled . . .

PETER. It seems

There's no one here to nab us—Jim's gone off :
 But I'd as lief be through with it and away
 Before my mother's back.

BELL. You're safe enough :
 There's none but sheep in sight for three miles round ;
 And they're all huddled up against the dykes
 With loltering tongues too baked to bleat *Stop thief !*
 Look slippery ! I'm half-scumfished by these walls—
 A weak flame easily snuffed out : the stink
 Of whitewash makes me queasy—sets me listening
 To catch the click of the cell-door behind me :
 I feel cold bracelets round my wrists already.
 Is thon the strong-room ?

PETER. Ay.

BELL. Then sharp's the word :
 It's time that we were stepping, Deadwood Dick.

(As PETER goes into the other room, EZRA tries to rise from his chair.)

EZRA. Help ! Murder ! Thieves !

BELL *(thrusting him easily back with one hand)*. The oracle
 has spoken !

And so, old image, you've found your tongue at last ?
 Small wonder you mislaid it in such a mug.
 Help, say you ? But you needn't bleat so loud :
 There's none within three miles to listen to you
 But me and Peter and Michael ; and we're not deaf :

So don't go straining your voice, old nightingale,
 Or splitting your wheezy bellows. And "thieves", no less!
 Tastes differ, but it isn't just the word
 I'd choose for welcoming my son and heir
 When he comes home and brings with him his—well,
 His son and his son's mother, shall we say,
 So's not to scandalise your innocence?
 And, come to think, it's none too nice a word
 For grandson's ears—and me, his tender mammy,
 Doing all I can to keep the lamb's heart pure.
 And as for "murder"—how could there be murder?
 Murder's full-blooded—no mean word like "thieves":
 And who could murder a bundle of dried peas-sticks?
 Flung on the fire, happen they'd crackle and blaze:
 But I'm hot enough to-day without you frizzling.
 Still "thieves" sticks in my gullet, old heel-of-the-loaf.
 Yet I'm not particular myself at times:
 And I've always gathered from your dutiful son
 Manners were taken for granted at Krindlesyke
 And never missed; so I'll overlook the word.
 You've not been used to talking with a lady,
 Old scrag-end: still I'm truly honoured, sir,
 In making your acquaintance: for I've heard
 Some pretty things about you from your son.

(EZRA, *who has shrunk back, gasping, into his chair, suddenly starts chuckling to himself.*)

BELL. You're merry, sir! Will you not share the jest?
 Aren't you the sparky blade, the daffing callant,
 Naffing and nickering like a three-year-old?
 Come, none-so-pretty, cough the old wheeze up
 Before it chokes you. Let me clap your back.
 You're surely never laughing at a lady?

(*Seizing him by the collar and shaking him.*)

You deafy nut, you gibbet, you rusty corncrake!
 Tell me what's kittling you, old skeleton,
 Or I'll joggle your bones till they rattle like castanets.

(*Suddenly releasing him.*)

Come, Peter, let's away from this mouldy gaol
 Before old heel-taps takes a fit. Your son
 Will be a full-grown shepherd before we leave—
 And his old mother, trapped between four walls,
 If you don't put a jerk in it.

(PETER comes slowly from the inner room, empty-handed ; and stands dazed in the doorway.)

BELL. Well, fumble-fingers,
What's kept you this half-year ? I could have burgled
The Bank of England in the time. What's up ?
Have you gone gite now ?

EZRA (*still chuckling*). Thieves cheated by a thief !

BELL. But where's the box ?

PETER. I didn't see the box.

BELL. You didn't see it ?

PETER. No, I didn't see it :

The valance hangs too low.

BELL. And you're too proud—
Too proud a prig to stoop ? Did you expect
The box to bounce itself into your arms
The moment it heard your step ?

PETER. I dared not stoop—
For there was some one lying on the bed,
Asleep, I think.

BELL. You think ?

PETER. I only saw
A hunched-up shoulder poking through the curtain.

BELL. A woman ?

PETER. Ay, my mother or her fetch.
I couldn't take my eyes from that hunched shoulder—
It looked so queer, till you called my name.

BELL. You said
Your mother was out. But we've no time to potter.
To think I've borne a son to a calf that's fleyed
Of a sleeping woman's back—his minney's and all !
Collops and chitterlings ! if she's asleep,
The job's the easier done. There's not a woman
Nor a woman's fetch would scare me from good gold.
I'll get the box.

(*She steals softly into the other room, and is gone for some time. The others await her expectantly in silence. Presently she comes out, bareheaded and empty-handed. Without a word, she goes to the window and pulls down the blind ; then closes the outer door—PETER and MICHAEL watching her in amazement.*)

EZRA. So Jim the fox has cheated Peter the fox—
And vixen and cub to boot ! But he made off

Only this morning ; and the scent's still fresh.
 You'll ken the road he'd take, the fox's track—
 A thief to catch a thief ! He's lifted all ;
 But if you cop him I'll give you half, although
 'Twill scarcely leave enough to bury us
 With decency when we have starved to death,
 Your mother and I. Run, lad—there's fifty-sovereign !
 And mind you clout and clapperclaw the cull—
 Spanghew his jacket when you've ripped his pockets,
 The scurvy scrunt !

BELL. Silence, old misery :
 There's a dead woman lying in the house—
 And you can prate of money !

PETER. Dead !

EZRA. Eliza !

BELL. I found the body huddled on the bed,
 Already cold and stiffening.

EZRA. I thought I heard . . .
 Yet she set out for Rawridge to fetch a man . . .

I felt her passing, in my very bones.
 I knew her foot : you cannot hear a step
 For forty year, and mistake it, though the spring's
 Gone out of it, and it's turned to a shuffle, it's still
 The same footfall. Why didn't she answer me ?
 She chattered enough before she went—such havers !
 Words tumbling from her lips in a witless jumble.
 Contrary to the last, she wouldn't answer ;
 But crept away, like a wounded pheasant, to die
 Alone. She's gone before me, after all—
 And she, so hale ; while I was crutched and crippled.
 I haven't looked on her face for eleven year :
 But she was bonnie when I saw her first
 That morning at the fair—so fresh and pink.

BELL. She must have died alone. It's an ill thing
 To die alone, folk say—but I don't know.
 She'd hardly die more lonely than she lived ;
 For every woman's lonely in her heart.
 I never looked on a lonelier face.

PETER. Come, Bell,
 We'd best be making tracks : there's nothing here—
 So let's be going.

BELL. Going, Peter—where ?

PETER. There's nothing to bide here for—we're too late :
Jim's stolen a march on us ; there's no loot left.

BELL. And you would leave a woman lying dead,
And an old blind cripple who cannot do a hand's-turn,
With no one to look after them—and they,
Your father and mother ?

PETER. Little enough I owe them.
What can we do for them, any way ? We can't
Bring back the dead to life : and sooner or later
Some one will come from Rawridge to see to the sheep ;
And dad won't hurt meanwhile ; he's gey and tough.

BELL. And you would leave your mother, lying dead,
With none but strangers' hands to lay her out—
No soul of her kin to tend her at the last ?

*(She goes to the dresser and looks in the drawers, taking out
an apron and tying it round her waist.)*

EZRA. I never guessed she'd go and leave me alone.
How did she think I could get along without her ?
She kenned I could do nothing for myself :
And yet she's left me alone, to starve to death—
Just sit in my chair and starve. It wasn't like her.
And the breath's scarce out of her body, before the place
Is overrun with a plague of thieving rats.
They'll eat me out of house and home : my God,
I've come to this—an old blind crippled dobbie,
Forsaken of wife and bairns ; and left to die—
To be nibbled to death by rats : de'il scart the vermin !

BELL. Time's drawn your teeth but hasn't dulled your
tongue's edge.

PETER. Come, woman, what the devil are you up to ?
What's this new game ?

BELL. Peter, I'm bidding here.

PETER. You're bidding here ?

BELL. And you are staying too.

PETER. By crikey, no ! You'll not catch me : I cannot—
With thon in the other room. I never could bear . . .

BELL. You'll stop till Michael's old enough to manage
The sheep without your aid : then you may spurt
To overtake Jim on the road to the gallows,
And race, the pair of you, neck and neck for hell ;
But not till I've done with you.

PETER. Nay, I'll be jiggered. . . .

BELL. Truth slips out.

PETER. I've a mind. . . .

BELL. She's gone to earth.

PETER. Just hold your gob, you. . . .

BELL. Does the daft beast fancy

That just because he's in his own calf-yard
 He can turn his horns on me? Michael, my son,
 You've got your way : and you're to be a herd.
 You never took to horseflesh like a Haggard :
 Yet your mother must do her best for you. A mattress
 Under a roof ; and sheep to keep you busy—
 That's what you're fashioned for—not bracken-beds
 In fellside ditches underneath the stars,
 And sharing potluck by the roadside fire.
 Well, every man must follow his own bent,
 Even though some woman's wried to let him do it :
 So I must bide within this whitewashed gaol,
 For ever scrubbing flagstones and washing dishes
 And darning hose and making meals for men,
 Half-suffocated by the stink of sheep,
 Till you find a lass to your mind ; and set me free
 To take the road again—if I'm not too doddery
 For gallivanting, as most folks are by the time
 They've done their duty by others. Who'd have dreamt
 I'd make the model mother after all ?
 It seems as though a woman can't escape
 Once she has any truck with men. But, carties !
 Something's gone topsy-turvy with creation
 When the cuckoo's turned domestic, and starts to rear
 The young house-sparrow. Granddad, Peter's home
 To mind the sheep : and you'll not be turned out
 If you behave yourself : and when you're lifted,
 There'll be a grandson still at Krindlesyke—
 For Michael is a Barrasford, blood and bone :
 And till the day he fetches home a bride
 I'm to be mistress here. But hark, old bones,
 You've got to mend your manners ; for I'm used
 To having my own way.

PETER. By gox, she is !

BELL. And there's not room for two such in one house.
 Where I am mistress, there can be no master :

So don't try on your pretty tricks with me.
I've always taken the whiphand with men.

PETER. You'll smart yet, dad.

BELL. You go about your business
Before your feet get frozen to the flagstones—
Winter's but six months off, you ken. It's time
You were watering those sheep, before their tongues
Are baked as black as your heart. You'd better take
The lad along with you : he cannot learn
The job too soon—so I'll get shot of the sight
Of your mug, and have one lout the less to do for.
Come, frisk your feet, the pair of you, and go :
I've that to do which I must do alone.

(As soon as PETER and MICHAEL are gone, BELL fills a basin with water from a bucket and carries it into the other room, shutting the door behind her.)

EZRA. To think she should go first, when I have had
One foot in the grave for hard on eleven year !
I little looked to taste her funeral ham.

PART II

An October afternoon, fifteen years later. There is no one in the room ; and the door stands open, showing a wide expanse of fell, golden in the low sunshine. A figure is seen approaching along the cart-track : and JUDITH ELLERSHAW, neatly dressed in black, appears at the door, and stands, undecided, on the threshold. She knocks several times, but no one answers ; so she steps in and seats herself on a chair near the door. Presently a sound of singing is heard without ; and BELL HAGGARD is seen, coming over the bent, a flame-coloured kerchief about her head, her skirt kilted to the knee, and her arms full of withered bracken. She enters, humming, but stops with a start on seeing JUDITH ; drops the bracken ; whips off her kerchief, and lets down her skirt ; and so appears as an ordinary cottage-wife.

JUDITH. You're Mistress Barrasford ?

BELL. Ay, so they call me.

JUDITH. I knocked ; but no one answered ; so I've taken
The liberty of stepping in to rest.
I'm Judith Ellershaw.

BELL. I've heard the name,
 But can't just mind. . . . Ay! You're the hard-mouthed wench
 That took the bit in her teeth and bolted—although
 You scarcely look it, either. Old Ezra used
 To mumble your name when he was raiming on
 About the sovereigns Jim made off with: he missed
 The money more than the son—small blame to him;
 Though why grudge travelling expenses to good-riddance?
 And still 'twas shabby to pinch the lot—a case
 Of pot and kettle, but I'd have scorned to bag
 The lot and leave the old folk penniless.
 'Twas hundreds Peter blabbed of—said our share
 Wouldn't be missed, or I'd have never set foot
 In Krindlesyke. To think I walked into this trap
 For fifty pound—that wasn't even here!
 I might have kenned—Peter never told the truth
 Except by accident. I did . . . and yet
 I came. I had to come: the old witch drew me.
 But Jim was greedy. . . .

JUDITH. Doesn't Jim live here now?

BELL. You're not sent back by the penitent then, to pay
 The interest on the loan he took that morning
 In an absent-minded fit—and pretty tales
 Are tarradiddles? Jim's not mucked that step
 In my time: Ezra thought he'd followed you.

JUDITH. Me?

BELL. You're Jim's wife?—though you've not taken his name;
 Stuck to your own, and rightly: I'd not swap mine
 For any man's: but you're the bride the bridegroom
 Lost before bedtime?

JUDITH. No, 'twas Phoebe Martin—
 And dead this fifteen year: she didn't last
 A twelvemonth after: it proved too much for her,
 The shock; for all her heart was set on Jim.

BELL. Poor fool: though I've no cause to call her so;
 For women are mostly fools where men come in.
 You're not the vanished bride? Then who've I blabbed
 The family secrets to, unsnecking the cupboard
 And setting the skeleton rattling his bones? I took you
 For one of us, who'd ken our pretty ways;
 And reckoned naught I could tell of Jim to Jim's wife
 Could startle her, though she'd no notion of it.

JUDITH. I took you for Jim's wife.

BELL.

Me ! I'm a fool—

But never fool enough to wear a ring
For any man.

JUDITH. Yet, Mistress Barrasford ?

BELL. They call me that : but I'm Bell Haggard still,
And will be to the day I die, and after—
Though happen there'll be marriage and giving in marriage
In hell ; for Old Nick's ever been matchmaker.
In that particular heaven would suit me better ;
But I've travelled the wrong road too far to turn now.

JUDITH. You're not the mother of Michael Barrasford ?

BELL. And who's the brass to say he's not my son ?
I'm no man's wife ; but what's to hinder me
From being a mother ?

JUDITH. Then Jim is his father ?

BELL. And what's that got to do with you, the man
I chose for my son's father ? Chose—God help us !
That's how we women gammon ourselves. Deuce kens
The almighty lot choice has to do with it !

JUDITH. It wasn't Jim then ?

BELL. Crikey ! You're not blate

Of asking questions : I've not been so riddled
Since that old egg with whiskers committed me.
Why harp on Jim ? I've not clapped eyes on Jim,
Your worship, though I fear I must plead guilty
To some acquaintance with the family,
As you might put it, seeing that Jim's brother
Is my son's father—though how it came to happen
The devil only kenned, and he's forgotten.

JUDITH. Thank God it wasn't Jim.

BELL. And so say I :

Though, kenning only Peter, I'm inclined
To fancy Jim may be the better man.
What licks me is, what's it to do with you ?
And why I answer your delicate questions, woman ?
Even old hard-boiled drew the line somewhere.

JUDITH. I'm the mother of Jim's daughter.

BELL.

You're the wench

The bride found here ?—and mother of a daughter ?
And live . . .

JUDITH. At Bellingham.

BELL. Where Michael finds
So often he's pressing business, must be seen to—
Something to do with sheep? I see. . . . To think
I didn't guess! Why is it any man
Can put the blinkers on us? But was I blind
Or only wanting not to see—afraid
Of what I've been itching after all these years?
Can a hawk be caged so long, it's scared to watch
The cage-door opening? More to it than that:
After all there's something of the mother in me.
Ay, you've found Michael's minney! As for his dad,
It's eight year since he quitted Krindlesyke
The second time for good.

JUDITH.

He left you?

BELL.

Hooked it:

But shed no tears for me: he only left me
As a sobering lout will quit the bramble-bush
He's tumbled in blind-drunk—or was it an anthill
He'd pillowed his fuddled head on? Anyway
He went sore-skinned, and gay to go; escaped
From Krindlesyke—he always had the luck,
Before the bitter winter that finished Ezra:
But I'd to stay on, listening all day long
To that old dotard counting fifty sovereigns
Your fancy-man made off with when he cleaned out
The coffers of Krindlesyke, the very day
Ananias and I came for our share, too late;
And so got stuck at Back-o'-Beyont like wasps
In a treacle-trap—the gold all gone: naught left
But the chink of coins in an old man's noddle that age
Had emptied of wits. He'd count them over and over—
Just stopping to curse Jim, when he called to mind
The box was empty: and often in the night
I'd hear him counting, counting in the dark,
Till the night he stopped at forty-nine, stopped dead
With a rattle—not a breath to whisper fifty.
A crookt corpse, yellow as his lost gold, I found him
When I fetched my candle.

JUDITH.

Dead?

BELL.

Ay, guttered out—

A dip burned to the socket. May chance puff out

My flame while it still burns steadily, and not sowse it
In a sweel of melted tallow.

JUDITH.

Ay, but it's sad

When the wits go first.

BELL.

And he so wried and geyzened

The undertakers couldn't strake him rightly.

Even when they'd nailed him down, and we were watching

By candle-light the night before the funeral,

Nid-nodding, Michael and I, just as the clock

Struck twelve there was a crack that brought us to

Bolt-upright as the coffin-lid flew off,

And old granddaddy sat up in his shroud.

JUDITH. God save us, woman ! Whatever did . . .

BELL.

I fancied

He'd popped up to say fifty ; but he dropped back

With knees to chin. They'd got to screw him down :

And they'd sore work to get him underground—

Snow overnight had reached the window-sill :

And when at length the cart got on the road

The coffin was jolted twice into the drifts

Before they'd travelled the twelve-mile to the churchyard :

And the hole they'd howked for him, chockful of slush :

And the coffin slipped with a splash into the sluther.

Av, we see life at Krindlesyke, God help us !

JUDITH. A fearsome end.

BELL.

Little to choose 'twixt ends.

So Michael's granddad, and your girl's, went home

To his forefathers, and theirs—both Barrasfords :

But I'd guess your bairn's a gentler strain, though mine's

No streak of me—all Barrasford I judged him.

But, though he's Ezra's stubbornness, he's naught

Of foxy Peter, and grows more like Eliza

I'd fancy, though I never kenned her living :

I only saw her dead.

JUDITH.

Eliza too ?

BELL. I was the first to look on her dead face

The morn I came. If she'd but lived a day,

Just one day longer, she'd have let me go.

No living woman could have held me here:

But she was dead, and so I had to stay—

A fly caught in the web of a dead spider.

It must be her he favours: and he's got

A dogged patience wellnigh crazes me :
 A husband born, as I was never born
 For wife. But happen you ken him well as I,
 Leastways his company-side, since he does business
 At Bellingham ? A happy ending, eh !
 For our mischances, they should make a match :
 Though naught that ever happens is an ending—
 A wedding, least of all.

JUDITH. I've never seen him.
 Ruth keeps her counsel. I'd not even heard
 His name till late last night, and then by chance ;
 But I've not slept a wink since, you may guess.
 When I heard " Barrasford of Krindlesyke ",
 My heart went cold within me, thinking of Jim
 And what he'd been to me. I'd had no news
 Of all that's happened since I left, the day
 Jim wedded, and . . .

BELL. The nowt felt like a poacher
 When keeper's sneaked his bunny and broken his snare ?

JUDITH. I fancied he perhaps . . .

BELL. Ay, likely enough
 Jim's wasted a sight of matches since that day
 He burnt his fingers so badly, but he's not kindled
 A hearthfire yet at Krindlesyke. Anyway,
 For Michael to be his son, I'd need to be
 Even an older flame of his than you,
 For Michael's twenty-one.

JUDITH. As old as that ?
 But I could never rest till I'd made sure.
 Knowing myself, I did not question Ruth. . . .

BELL. What's worth the kenning's seldom learned by speiring.

JUDITH. Though, knowing myself, I dreaded what might
 chance,
 What might already . . .

BELL. You'd no cause to worrit :
 Michael's not that sort : he's respectable—
 Too staid and sober for his tinker mother :
 He'll waste no matches lighting wayside fires.

JUDITH. Like me, Ruth's easy kindled, hard to quench—
 A flying spark, and the heather's afire in a gale,
 And the fell's burned to the rock—naught but black ash
 When the downpour comes, too late.

BELL. Ay—but the flare
And crackle and tossing flames and golden smoke,
And the sting of the reek in the nostrils !

JUDITH. Ruth'll love
Once and for all : like me, she's born for marriage,
Though in my eager trustfulness I missed it.
You'll scorn me, as I often scorn myself ;
But, kenning the worst, in my heart of hearts I hanker . . .
Jim meant so much to me once, I can't forget,
Or keep from dwelling on the might-have-been.
Snow on the fell-top now ; but underground
Fire smoulders still, and still might burst to flame.
Deceived and broken . . .

BELL. What's this jackadandy,
That you and Phoebe both—and kenning him !

JUDITH. What's kenning got to do with love ? It makes
No difference once you've given. . . .

BELL. If I've a heart
And it's broken, it's a broken stone sunk deep
In bottomless moss-hags where no heat can touch it
Till the whole world grills at last on hell's gridiron.

JUDITH. Nothing you ken of broken hearts or hell,
To talk so lightly : I have come through hell ;
But you have never loved. What's given in love
Is given. It's something to have loved, at least :
And I have Ruth.

BELL. Ay, the green bracken-shoots
Soon push through the black litter of charred heath—
And you have Ruth.

JUDITH. Or had her till last night :
I've lost her now, it seems.

BELL. You let life hurt you :
You shy at shadows and shrink from the crack of the whip
Before the lash stings ; and life loves no sport
Like yarking a shivering hide : you ask for it.

JUDITH. I've been through much.

BELL. And so you should ken better
Than to hang yourself before the judge gives sentence :
His honour can put the black cap on for himself
Without your aid. You'll die a thousand deaths
Before your end comes, peacefully in bed.
Why should you go half-way to meet your funeral ?

JUDITH. Though there's a joy in giving recklessly,
 In flinging all your faggots on the blaze,
 In losing all for love—a crazy joy
 Long years of suffering cannot quench, I'd have
 Ruth spared that madness : and, kenning she's just myself
 Born over, how could I sleep with the dread upon me
 She'd throw herself away, would burn to waste,
 Suffering as I have. . . .

BELL. Anyway, you burned :
 And who's to say what burns to waste, even when
 The kindled peatstack fires the steading ? Far better
 To perish in a flare than smoulder away
 Your life in smother : and what are faggots for
 If not for firing ? But you've suffered, woman,
 More than you need because you were ashamed.
 The lurcher that slinks with drooping tail and lugs
 Just asks for pelting. It's shame makes life bad travelling—
 The stone in the shoe that lames you. Other folk
 Might be ashamed to do the things I've done—
 That's their look-out : they've got no call to do them :
 I've never done what I would blush to own to ;
 I've got my self-respect. For all my talk,
 I'm proud of Michael ; and you're proud of Ruth,
 I take it ?

JUDITH. Ay.

BELL. Then where's the need for shame,
 Because they were come-by-chances ? A mean thief
 That snivels because the fruit he relishes
 Is stolen, and keeps munching it to the core !
 Married, and so lived happily ever after ?
 A deal of virtue in a wedding-ring !
 And marriage-lines make all the difference, don't they ?
 Your man and mine were born in lawful wedlock :
 And sober honest dutiful sons they've proved—
 While our two bastards, Ruth and . . .

JUDITH. Never been
 A better daughter !

BELL. Then what would you have ?
 You've had her to yourself, without the worrit
 Of a man to wear your soul out all these years.
 If I'd been married, before the week was through,
 I'd have picked my husband's pocket to buy ratsbane,

Envy the spiders who can gobble up
 Husbands they've no more use for between meals.
 But I wasn't born to kick my heels in the air
 For a plaguey husband ; and if I'm to dangle
 'Twon't be for that, but something worth putting myself
 Out of the way for. You say I'll scorn you, woman.
 Who'm I to scorn ? You're not my sort ; but I ken
 Too much of life for easy scorn : I've learnt
 The lessons of the road.

JUDITH. I've known the road too,
 And learned its bitter. . . .

BELL. You didn't relish it ?
 It's meat to me ; but then I like mixed pickles—
 Life with an edge, and a free hand with the pepper.
 You can't make a good hotch-potch with only 'taties ;
 And a good hotch-potch I'm fairly famished for :
 I've starved on the lean fare of Krindlesyke :
 My mouth is watering for the old savoury mess—
 Life piping hot : for I'm no man in the moon
 To sup off cold pease-porridge : and it's the wash
 Of bitters over the tongue gives bite to the pepper.
 But you've no taste for bitters or devilled collops—
 Roast scrag on Sunday, cold mutton and boiled 'taties
 The rest of the week, is the most you'd ask of life—
 Nay, a cup of milky tea by a white hearth—
 And you're in heaven !

JUDITH. You're not far out.

BELL. I take
 Mine laced with rum by a camp-fire under the stars—
 And not too dainty to mind the smatch of smoke.

JUDITH. Tastes differ.

BELL. Yet, for all my appetite,
 At Krindlesyke I'm a ewe over-head in a drift
 That's cropped the grass round its feet and mumbles its wool
 For nourishment—and that's what you call life !
 You're you : I'm I. It takes all turns for a circus ;
 And it's just the change and chances of the ring
 Make the old game worth the candle—variety
 At all costs, hurly-burly, razzle-dazzle,
 Life cowering creels through endless flaming hoops,
 A breakneck business ending in a crash,
 If only in the big drum ! The devil's to pay

For what we have, or haven't ; and I believe
In value for my money.

JUDITH. Peace and quiet
And a good home are worth . . .

BELL. But you've no turn
For circuses : your heart's a pipe-clayed hearthstone—
No ring for hoofs to trample to the clang
Of cymbals, blare of trumpets, rattle of drums :
No dash of brandy in your stirabout :
Porridge in peace, with a door 'twixt you and the weather,
A sanded floor and the glow and smother of peat :
But I'd rather be a lean pig running free
Than the fattest flitch of bacon on the rafters.

JUDITH. And yet you've kept . . .

BELL. Ay, but my fingers have itched
Sorely to fire the peatstack in a west wind,
That flames might swarm walls and roof-tree, and Krindlesyke,
Perishing in a crackle and golden flare-up,
Tumble, a smoking ruin of blackened stone.

JUDITH. Yet you've kept house . . .

BELL. Ay, true enough ; I've been
Cook, slut, and butler here this fifteen year,
As thrang as Throp's wife when she hanged herself
With her own dishclout. Needs must, the fire will burn
Barred in the grate—burn ? Nay, I've only smouldered
Like sodden peat. Ay, true, I've drudged ; and yet
What could I do against that old dead witch
Lying in wait for me the day I came ?
Her very patience was a kind of cunning
That challenged me, hinting I'd not the grit
To stand her life even a dozen years.
What could I do but prove I could stick it out ?
If I'd turned tail, she'd have bared her toothless gums
To grin at me : and how could I go through life
Haunted by her dead smile ? But now the spell
Is snapt : I've proved her wrong : she cannot hold me.
I've served my sentence ; the cell-door opens ; and yet
You would have done that fifteen-years-hard willingly ?
Some folk can only thrive in gaol—no nerve
To face the risks outside, and never happy
Till lagged for life—meals punctual and no cares
And the king for landlord. While I've eaten my head off,

You've been a galled jade fretting for the stable.
Tastes differ ; but it's just that you're not my sort
Puzzles me why you gave yourself to Jim.

JUDITH. There are no whys and wherefores when you love.

BELL. I gave myself to Peter, with a difference.
You'd have wed Jim : I just let Peter travel
With me to keep the others from pestering ;
And scooted him when Michael could manage the sheep.

JUDITH. You never loved him. I loved Jim. . . .

BELL. A deal
Of difference that's made !

JUDITH. More than you can guess.

BELL. Peter stuck longer, tangled in the brambles.

JUDITH. I loved Jim, so I trusted him.

BELL. But when
You found him out ?

JUDITH. If you had loved you'd ken
That finding out makes little difference.
There are things in this life you don't understand,
For all your ready tongue.

BELL. Ay—men and women
I've given up—just senseless marionettes
Jigging and bobbing to the twitching strings :
Though I like to fancy I pick my steps and choose
The tunes I dance to—happen that's my pride :
But, choose or not, we've got to pay the piper.
JUDITH. Ay, in your pride you think you've the best of life.
You're missing more than you reckon, the best of all.

BELL. Well, I've no turn for penal servitude.
But have you never gabbed to keep your heart up ?
What are hats for if not for talking through ?
Pride—we've both pride—yours hot and fierce, and mine
Careless and cold—yet both came the same cropper—
Not quite, for you were hurt to the death almost,
While I've picked myself up scatheless—not a scratch ;
Only my skirt torn, and it always dragged.

JUDITH. You never cared : I couldn't have borne myself
If I'd not cared : I'd hate myself as much
As I've hated Jim whiles when I thought of all.
They're mixer-maxter, hate and love ; and often
I've wondered if I loathed or loved Jim most.
I understand as little as you, it seems :

Yet it's only caring counts for anything
In this life ; though it's caring's broken me.

BELL. It stiffens some. But why take accidents
So bitterly. It's all a rough-and-tumble
Of accidents, from the accident of birth
To the last accident that lays us out—
A go-as-you-please, and the devil take the hindmost.
It's pluck that counts, and an easy seat in the saddle :
Better to break your neck at the first ditch
Than waste the day in seeking gates to slip through.
Cold-blooded crawlers I've no sort of use for.
You took the leap, and landed in the quickset ;
But at least you leapt sky-high before you tumbled :
And it's silly to lie moaning in the prickles :
Best pick yourself up sharp and shake the thorns out,
Else the following hoofs will bash you. Give life leave
To break your heart, 'twill trample you . . .

JUDITH. Leave, say you ?
Life takes French-leave : your heart's beneath the hoofs
Before . . .

BELL. But grin and keep yourself heart-whole ;
And you'll find the fun of the fair's in taking chances :
It's the uncertainty makes the race—no sport
In putting money on dead-certainties.
I back the dark horse—stake my soul against
The odds ; and I'll not grieve if life should prove
A welsher in the end : I'll have had my fling
At least : and yet talk's cheap . . .

JUDITH. Ay, cheap.

BELL. Dirt-cheap—

Three-shots-a-penny ; and it's not every time
You hit Aunt Sally and get a good cigar,
Or even pot a milky coconut :
And all the while life's had the upper hand :
I slipt the day I came and lost my grip :
Life got me by the scruff of the neck and held
My proud nose to the grindstone. My turn now—
I'll be upsides with life and teach it manners
Before death gets the strangle-hold : I'll have
The last laugh, though it choke me. And what's death,
To set us twittering ? I'll be no frightened squirrel :
Scarting and scolding never yet scared death :

When he's a mind to crack me like a nut
 I'd be no husk—still ripe and milky, I'd have him
 Swallow the kernel and spit out the shell
 Before all's shrivelled to black dust. But, tombstones!
 What's turned my thoughts to death? It's these white walls
 After a day in the open. When I came
 At first these four walls seemed to close in on me
 As though they'd crush the life out; and I felt
 I'd die between them: but after all . . . And yet
 Who kens what green sod's to be broken for him?
 Queer that I'll lie like any innocent
 Beneath the daisies! but the gowans must wait.
 Sore-punished, I'm not yet knocked out: life's had
 My head in chancery, but I'll soon be free
 To spar another round or so with him
 Before he sends me spinning to the ropes.
 And life would not be life without the hazards.

JUDITH. Too many hazards for me.

BELL.

Ay, so it seems:

But you're too honest for the tricky game.
 I've a sort of honesty—a liar and thief
 In little things, I'm honesty itself
 In the things that matter, few enough, deuce kens:
 But your heart's open to the day, while mine's
 A pitchy night, with just a star or so
 To light me to cover at the keeper's step.
 You're honest, to your hurt: your honesty's
 A knife that cuts through all, and will be cutting—
 Hacking and jabbing and thirsting to draw blood,
 And turning in the wound it makes—a gulley
 To cut your heart out, if you doubted it:
 And so you're faithful even to a fool;
 While I would just be faithful to myself,
 You thrive on misery.

JUDITH.

Nay: I've only asked
 A little happiness of life: I've starved
 For happiness, God kens.

BELL.

What's happiness?
 You've got a sweet-tooth, and don't relish life:
 You want run-honey, when it's the honey-comb
 That gives the crunch and flavour. Would you be
 As happy as a maggot in a medler,

Swelling yourself in sweet deliciousness
Till the blackbird nips you ? None escapes his crop.
You'd quarrel with the juiciest plum because
Your teeth grit on the stone, instead of cracking
The shell and savouring the bitter kernel.
Nigh all the jests life cracks have bitter kernels.

JUDITH. Ay, bitter enough to set my teeth on edge.

BELL. What are teeth for, if we must live on pap ?
The sweetest marrow's in the hardest bone,
As you've found with Ruth, I take it.

JUDITH. Ay : and still
You have been faithful, Bell.

BELL. A faithful fool,
Against the grain, this fifteen year : my son
And that dead woman were too strong for me :
They turned me false to my nature ; broke me in
Like a flea in harness that draws a nutshell-coach.
Till then I'd jumped and bit at my own sweet will.
Oh ! amn't I the wiseacre, the downy owl,
Fancying myself as knowing as a signpost ?
And yet there's always some new twist to learn.
Life's an old thimblerrigger, and, it seems,
Can still get on the silly side of me,
Can still bamboozle me with his hanky-panky :
He always kens a trick worth two of mine,
Though he lets me spot the pea beneath the thimble
Just often enough to keep me in good conceit.
And he's kept you going too, with Ruth to live for.

JUDITH. If it hadn't been for Ruth . . .

BELL.

He kens, he kens :

As canny as he's cute for his own ends,
He's a wise showman, and doesn't overfeed
The living skeleton or let the fat lady starve :
And so we're each kept going in our own kind
Till we've served our turn. Mine's talking, you'll have gathered.

JUDITH. Ay, you've a tongue.

BELL.

It rattles in my head
Like corks in a mugger's cart : but I've had few
To talk with here, and too much time for brooding,
Turning things over and over in my own mind
These fifteen years.

JUDITH. True : neighbours hereabouts
Are few and far to seek.

BELL. The devil a chance
I've ever had of a gossip—and, as for news,
I've had to fall back on the wormy Bible
That props the broken looking-glass : so now
I've got the chance of a crack my tongue goes randy,
And patters like a cheapjack's, or a bookie's
Offering you odds against the favourite, life—
Or wasn't life the dark horse ? I have talked
My wits out till I'm like a drunken tipster
Too milled to ken the outsider from the favourite.
My sharp tongue's minced my very wits to words.

JUDITH. Ay, it's been rattling round.

BELL. A slick tongue spares
The owner the fag of thinking : it's the listeners
Who get the headache. And yet I could talk
At one time to some purpose—didn't dribble
Like a tap that needs a washer : and, by carties,
It's talking I've missed most : I've always been
Like an urchin with a withy—must be slashing,
Thistles for choice : and not once since I came
Have I had a real good shindy to warm my blood.

JUDITH. I'd have thought Ezra . . .

BELL. Ay, we fratched at first—
For he'd a tongue of his own ; and could use it too
Better than most men folk—a bonnie sparrer,
I warrant, in his time, but past his best
Before I kenned him—little fight left in him ;
And when his wits went cranky he just havered—
Ground out his two tunes like a hurdy-gurdy
With most notes missing and a creaky handle.

JUDITH. And Michael ?

BELL. Michael ! The lad will sit mumchance
The evening through : he's got a powerful gift
Of saying nothing—no sparks to strike off him,
Though he's had to serve as whetstone this long while
To keep an edge on my tongue.

JUDITH. He's quiet ?

BELL. Quiet !
A husband born. No need to fear for Ruth :
She's safe with Michael, safe for life.

JUDITH.

He's steady ?

BELL. He's not his mother's son : he banks his money,
 And takes no hazards, never risks his shirt :
 As canny as I'm spendthrift, he's the sort
 Can pouch his cutty half-smoked ten minutes after
 I've puffed away my pipeful. Ay, Ruth's safe :
 His peatstacks never fire : he'll never lose
 A lamb or let a ewe slip through his hands
 For want of watching, though he go for nights
 Without a nap. The day of Ezra's funeral
 A score of gimmers perished in the snow,
 But not a ewe of Michael's : his were folded
 Before the wind began to pile the drifts :
 He takes no risks.

JUDITH.

Ruth needs a careful man ;
 For she's the sort that's steady with the steady,
 And a featherhead with featherheads. She's sense :
 And Michael . . .

BELL.

Michael's sense itself—a cob
 Too steady to shy even at the crack of doom :
 He'll keep the beaten track, the road that leads
 To four walls and the same bed every night.
 Talk of the devil—but he's coming now
 Up Bloodysyke : ay, and there's some one with him—
 A petticoat, no less !

JUDITH.

Mercy ! It's Ruth :
 Yet I didn't leave till she was safely off
 To work. . . .

BELL.

Work ? Michael too had business
 In Bellingham this morning, oddly enough.
 Doubtless they helped each other, and got through
 The job the quicker, working well together :
 And a parson took a hand in it for certain,
 If I ken Michael—likes things proper, he does,
 And always had a weakness for black lambs.
 But who'd have guessed he'd . . . Surely there's a strain
 Of Haggard in the young limb, after all.
 No Haggard stops to ask a parent's leave,
 Even should they happen to ken the old folk by sight—
 My own I knew by hearsay. But what luck
 You're here to welcome the young pair !

JUDITH. No! They'll wonder . . .
I bring no luck to weddings . . . I must go . . .

BELL. You can't without being spotted : but you can hide
Behind the door till I speak with them.

JUDITH. No! No!
Not that door . . . I can't hide behind that door
Again.

BELL. That door? Well, you ken best what's been
Between that door and you. It's crazy and old,
But it looks innocent—wooden-faced humbug : yet
I don't trust doors myself ; they've got a knack
Of shutting me in. But you'll be snug enough
In the other room : I'd advise you to lie down
And rest ; you're looking trashed : and, come to think,
I've a deal to say to the bridegroom before I go.

JUDITH. Go?

BELL. Quick, this way : step lively or they'll catch
Your skirt-tail whisking round the door-cheek.

(BELL hustles JUDITH into the inner room, closing the door behind her. She then thrusts the flame-coloured kerchief into her pocket, picks up the bracken and flings it on the fire, seats herself on the settle with her back to the door, and gazes at the blaze, not even glancing up as MICHAEL and RUTH enter.)

MICHAEL. Mother!

BELL. Is that you, prodigal son? You're late to-day,
As always when you've business in Bellingham.
That's through, I trust? Those ewes have taken a deal
Of seeing to : and I'm lonely as a milestone
When you're away.

MICHAEL. I've taken the last trip, mother :
That job's through ; and I've made the best of bargains.
You'll not be lonely now when I'm not here :
I've brought you a daughter to keep you company.

BELL *(turning sharply)*.
I might have known you were no prodigal son.
He didn't bring home even a single sausage,
For all his keeping company with swine.
But what should I do with a daughter, lad?
Do you fancy if I'd had a mind for daughters
I couldn't have had a dozen of my own?

One petticoat's enough in any house :

And who are you to bring your mother a daughter ?

MICHAEL. Her husband. Ruth's my bride. Ruth Ellershaw
She was till ten o'clock—Ruth Barrasford
Till Doomsday now.

BELL. When did I give you leave
To bring strange lasses to disturb my peace
Just when I'm getting used to Krindlesyke ?
To think you'd wed without a word !

MICHAEL. Leave, say you ?
You'll always have your jest. I said no word,
For words breed words ; and I'd not have a swarm
Of stinging ants bumming about my lugs
For days beforehand.

BELL. Ants ? They'd need be kaids
To burrow through your fleece and prog your skin.

MICHAEL. I'd as lief ask leave of the tricky wind as you :
And, leave or not, I'd see you damned if you tried
To part us. None of your games ! I'm no young wether
To be let keep his old dam company,
Trotting beside her . . .

BELL. Cock-a-whoop, my lad !
Well done for you, Ruth, lass ; you've kindled him
As I could never do, for all my chaff.
I little dreamt he'd ever turn lobstropolis :
I hardly ken him with his dander up,
Swelling and bridling like a bubblyjock.
If I pricked him now he'd bleed red blood—not ewe's milk :
The flick of my tongue can nettle him at last ;
His haunches quiver, for all his woolly coat :
He'll prove a Haggard yet. Nay—he said “ husband ” !
No Haggard I've heard tell on's been a husband :
But, if your taste's for husbands, lass, you're suited—
Till Doomsday, as he says. He kens his mind :
When barely breeched he chose to bide with sheep,
Though he might have travelled with horses ; and it's sheep
His heart is set on still. But I've no turn
For certainties myself—no sheep for me :
Life with a tossing mane and clattering hoofs,
The chancy life for me—not certain death,
With the stink of tar and sheepdip in my nostrils.

MICHAEL. Life with a clattering tongue, you mean to say.

BELL (*to RUTH*). Well, you're a bonnie lass, I must admit ; And, if I'd fancied daughters, I might have done Much worse than let young Michael pick them for me : He's not gone poseying in the kitchen garden. I never guessed he'd an eye for aught but ewes : As blind as other mothers, I'd have sworn I'd kenned him inside-out since he was—nay ! But he was never a rapscallion ripstitch— Always a prim and proper little man, A butter-won't-melt-in-my-mouth young sobersides, Since he found his own feet. Yet the blade that's wed— The jack-knife turned into a pair of scissors, Without a word, is not the son I thought him. There's something of his mammy after all In Michael : and, as for you, my lass, you're just Your minney's very spit.

RUTH. You ken my mother ?

BELL. Ken Judith Ellershaw ? You'll ask me next If I'm acquainted with Bell Haggard. Well, Gaping for turnips, Michael ?

MICHAEL. I never heard . . .

BELL. What have you heard this fifteen year, except The bleat of sheep, till Ruth's voice kittled your ear ? But Judith sent some message by her daughter ?

RUTH. She doesn't ken I've come —nay, doesn't dream I'm married even, though I meant to tell her This morning ; but I couldn't—she started so When I let slip Michael's name, and turned so pale. I don't know why, but I feared some word of hers Might come between us ; and I couldn't let Even my mother come between us now : So I pretended to set out for work As usual ; then, when we were married, went back With Michael to break the news. But the door was locked, And neighbours said she was out—been gone some time ; And Michael was impatient to be home ; So I had to come. I can't think what has happened. I hated leaving her like that : I'd never In all my life done such a thing.

BELL. Well, Michael Should be relieved to hear it's a first offence.

RUTH. She'd gone without a word . . .

- BELL. A family failing—
And happen on like errand to your own.
- RUTH. Mother? Nay, she's too old. You said you knew her.
- BELL. Ay, well enough to reckon I'm her elder;
And who's to tell me I'm too old to marry?
A woman is never too old for anything:
It's only men grow sober and faint-hearted:
And Judith's just the sort whose soul is set
On a husband and a hearthstone—I ken that.
- RUTH. Nay, mother'll never marry.
- BELL. You can speak
With all the cock-a-whoop of ignorance;
For you're too young to dare to doubt your wisdom.
It's a wise man, or a fool, can speak for himself,
Let alone for others, in this haphazard life.
But give me a young fool rather than an old—
A plucky plunger than a canny crone
Who's old enough to ken she doesn't ken.
You're right; for doubting is a kind of dotage:
Experience ages and decays; while folk
Who never doubt themselves die young—at ninety.
Age never yet brought gumption to a ninny;
And you cannot reckon up a stranger's wits
By counting his bare patches and grey hairs:
It's seldom sense that makes a bald head shine;
And I'm not partial to Methuselahs.
Keep your cocksureness while you can: too soon
Time plucks the feathers off you, and you lie
Naked and skewered, with not a cock-a-doodle
Or flap of the wings to warm your heart again.
And so you quitted your mammy without a word
When the jockey whistled?
- RUTH. Nay, I left a letter:
'Twas all I could do.
- BELL. She's lost a daughter, and got
A bit of paper instead: and what have I
For my lost son?
- MICHAEL. You've lost no son, but gained
A daughter. You'll always live with us.
- BELL. Just so.
I've waited for you to say that: and it comes pat.

You'll think his thoughts and mutter them in your mind
 Before he can give them tongue, Ruth. He's not said
 An unexpected thing since he grew out
 Of his first breeches ; and, like the most of men,
 He speaks so slowly you can almost catch
 The creaking of his wits between the words.

RUTH. Well, I've a tongue for two : and you, yourself,
 Don't lack for . . .

BELL. So, all's settled : you've arranged
 The world for your convenience, and have planned
 Your mothers' lives between you ? I'm to be
 The dear old grannie in the ingle-neuk,
 And hide my grizzled wisps in a mutch with frills ?
 Nay, God forbid ! I'm no tame pussy-cat
 To snuggle on a corner of the settle
 With one eye open for a chance-thrown titbit
 While the good housewife goes about her duties—
 Me ! lapping with blinking eyes and possing paws
 The saucer of skim-milk that young skinflint spares me,
 And purring when her darlings pull my tail—
 Great-grandchildren, too, to Ezra on both sides.
 Ay, you may gape like a pair of guddled brandling ;
 But that old bull-trout's grandsire to you both,
 And a double dose of his blue blood will run
 In the veins of your small fry—if fish have veins.

MICHAEL. You surely never mean to say . . .

BELL. I do.

More than a little for you young know-alls to learn
 When you meet with Judith Ellershaw : for, havers
 As it sounds to your young lugs, the world went round
 And one or two things happened before you were born.
 Yet none of us kens what life's got up his sleeve :
 He's played so long, and had a deal of practice
 Since he sat down with Adam : he's always got
 A trump tucked out of sight that takes the trick.
 But, son, you've lived with me for all these years,
 And yet ken me so little ? Grannie's mutch-frills !
 I'd as lief rig myself in widow's weeds
 For my fancy-man, who may have departed this life
 For all I ken or care.

MICHAEL. Come, hold your tongue :
 Enough of shameless talk. I'm master now ;

I've floundered in so long, and, snuffing the wind,
Show a clean pair of heels to Krindlesyke.
A mongrel breed, say you ? And who but a man
Could have a wild-cat hunter making his bed
For him for fifteen years, and never know it ?
But the old wife's satisfied at last : she should be ;
She's had my best years ; I've grown old and grizzled
And full of useless wisdom in her service.
She's taught me much, for I've had time and to spare,
Brooding among these God-forsaken fells,
To turn life inside-out in my own mind,
And study every thread of it, warp and weft.
I'm far from the same woman who came here ;
And I'll take up my old life with a difference
Now she and you've got no more use for me :
You've squeezed me dry betwixt you.

MICHAEL. Dry, do you say ?
The Tyne's in spate, and we must swim for life,
Eh, Ruth ? But you'll soon get used . . .

BELL. She's done with me.
She'll not be sorry to lose me : I fancy at times
She felt she'd got more than she bargained for—
A wasp rampaging in her spider's web.
“ Far above rubies ” has never been my line,
Though I could wag a tongue with Solomon
Like the Queen of Sheba herself—I doubt if she
Rose in the night to give meat to her household !
She must have been an ancestor of mine,
For she'd traik any distance for a crack,
The gipsy-hearted gan-wife that she was.

MICHAEL. Wild-cats and hunters and the Queen of Sheba—
A royal family, Ruth, you've married into !

BELL. But now I can kick Eliza's shoes sky-high :
Nay—I must shuffle them quietly off, and lay
The old wife's shoes decently by the hearth,
As I found them when I came—a slattern stop-gap,
Ready for the young wife to step into.
They'll fit her, as they never fitted me :
For all her youth, they will not gall her heels
Or give her corns : she's the true Cinderella :
The clock has struck for her, and the dancing's done,
And the Prince has brought her home—to wash the dishes.

But now I'm free ; and I'll away to-night.
 My bones have been restless in me all day long :
 They felt their freedom coming, before I kened.
 I've little time to lose : I'm getting old—
 Stiff-jointed in my wits that once were nimble
 As a ferret among the bobtails, old and dull.
 A night or so may seem to matter little,
 When I've already lost full fifteen year :
 But I hear the owls call, and my fur's atingle :
 The Haggard blood is pricking in my veins.

(She loosens the string of her apron, which slips to the ground, kilts her skirt to her knee, takes the flame-coloured kerchief from her pocket and twists it about her head, while MICHAEL and RUTH watch the transformation in amazement.)

MICHAEL. But you don't mean to leave us ?

BELL.

Pat it comes :

You've just to twitch the wire and the bell rings :
 You'll learn the trick soon, Ruth. *(To MICHAEL)* Bat, don't you see

I've just put on my nightcap, ready for bed—
 Grannie's frilled mutch ? I leave you, Michael ? Son,
 The time came, as it comes to every man,
 When you'd to make a choice betwixt two women.
 You've made your choice, and chosen well : but I
 Who've always done the choosing, and never yet
 Tripped to the beck of any man or bobbed
 To any living woman—I'm free to follow
 My own bent, now that that old witch's fingers
 Have slackened their cold clutch ; and your dead grannie
 Has gained her ends and seen you settled down
 At Krindlesyke : and from this on I too
 Am dead to you. You'll soon enough forget me :
 The world would end if a man could not forget
 His mother's deathbed in his young wife's arms—
 Though I'm far from corpse-cold yet ; and it may be years
 Before they pluck Bell Haggard's kerchief off
 To tie her chin up with, and ripe her pockets
 Of her last pennies to shut up her eyes.
 Even then they'll have to tug the chin-clout tight
 To keep her tongue from wagging. Well, my son,
 So it's good-bye till Doomsday.

MICHAEL. You're not going?
I thought you only havered. You can't go.
Do you think I'd let you go and . . .

BELL.Hearken, Ruth :
That's the true husband's voice : for husbands think,
If only they are headstrong and high-handed,
They're getting their own way : they charge head-down
At their own image in the window-glass,
And don't come to their senses till their carcase
Is spiked with smarting splinters. But I'm your mother,
Not your tame wife, lad ; and I'll gan my gait.

MICHAEL. You shall not go, for all your crazy cackle—
My mother on the road, a tinker's baggage,
While I've a roof to shelter her!

BELL. You pull
The handle downwards towards you, and the beer
Spouts out. No hope for you, Ruth : lass, you're safe—
Safe as a linnet in a cage, for life :
No need to read your hand to tell your fortune :
No gallivanting with the dark-eyed stranger,
Calleevering over all the countryside
When the owls are hooting to the hunters' moon,
For the wife of Michael Barrasford. Well, boy,
What if I choose to be a tinker's baggage ?
It was a tinker's baggage mothered you—
For tying a white apron round the waist
Has never made a housewife of a gipsy—
And a tinker's baggage went out of her way
To set you well on yours ; and now she turns.

MICHAEL. You shall not go, I say ; I'm master here,
And I won't let you shame me. I've been decent ;
And have always done my duty by the sheep,
Working to keep a decent home together
To bring a wife to : and, for all your jeers,
There are worse things for a woman than a home
And husband and a lawful family.
You shall not go. You say I ken my mind . . .

BELL. Ay, but not mine. What should a tinker's trollop
Do in the house of Michael Barrasford
But bring a blush to his children's cheeks? God help them,
If they take after me, if they've a dash
Of Haggard blood—for ewe's milk laced with brandy

Is like to curdle : or, happen I should say,
God help their father !

MICHAEL. Mother, why should you go ?
Why should you want to travel the ditch-bottom
When you've a hearth to sit by, snug and clean ?

BELL. The fatted calf's to be killed for the prodigal mother ?
You've not the hard heart of the young cockrobin
That's got no use for parents once he's mated :
But I'm somehow out of place within four walls,
Tied to one spot—that never wander the world.
I long for the rumble of wheels beneath me—to hear
The clatter and creak of the lurching caravan,
And the daylong patter of raindrops on the roof :
Ay, and the gossip of nights about the camp-fire—
The give and take of tongues : mine's getting stiff
For want of use, and spoiling for a fight.

MICHAEL. Nay—still as nimble and nippy as a flea !

BELL. But I could talk at one time ! There are days
When the whole world's hoddendoon and draggled-tailed,
Drooked through and through ; and blurry gurdy days
When the wind blows snell—but it's something to be stirring,
And not shut up between four glowering walls
Like blind white faces ; and you never ken
What traveller your wayside fire will draw
Out of the night, to tell outlandish tales,
Or crack a jest, or start a quarrel with you,
Till the words bite hot as ginger on the tongue.
Anger's the stuff to loose a tongue grown rusty,
And keep it in good fettle for all chances.
I'm sick of dozing by a dumb hearthstone—
And the peat with never a click or crackle in it,
Famished for news.

MICHAEL. For scandal.

BELL. There's no scandal
For those who can't be scandalised—just news :
All's fish that comes to their net. I was made
For company.

MICHAEL. And you'd go back again
To that tag-rag-and-bobtail ? What's the use
Of a man's working to keep a decent home
When his own mother tries to drag him down ?

BELL. Nay, my pernickety fine gentleman,
 But I'll not drag you down : you're free of me :
 I've slipped my apron off ; and you're tied now
 To your wife's apron-strings—for men folk seem
 Uneasy on the loose, and never happy
 Unless they're clinging to some woman's skirt.
 I'm out of place in any decent house
 As a kestrel in a hencoop. Ay, you're decent ;
 But, son, remember a man's decency
 Depends on his braces ; and it's I who've sewn
 Your trouser-buttons on : so when you fasten
 Your galluses give the tinker's baggage credit.
 She's done her best for you, and scrubbed and scoured
 Against the grain for all these years to keep
 Your home respectable ; though in her heart,
 Thank God, she's never been respectable—
 No dry-rot in her bones while she's alive :
 Time and to spare for decency in the grave.
 So you can do your duty by the sheep
 While I go hunting with the jinneyhoolets—
 Birds of a feather—ay, and fleece with fleece :
 And when I'm a toothless, mumbling crone, you'll be
 So proper a gentleman 'twill be hard to tell
 The shepherd from the sheep. Some one must rear
 The mutton and wool to keep us fed and warm ;
 But that's not my line : please to step this way
 For the fancy goods and fakish faldalals,
 Trinkets and toys and fairings. Son, you say
 You're master here : well, that's for Ruth to settle :
 I'll be elsewhere. I've never knuckled down
 To any man ; and I'll be coffin-cold
 Before I brook a master : so good-night
 And pleasant dreams, and a long family
 Of curly lambkins bleating round the board.

RUTH. Michael, you'll never let her go alone ?
 She's only talking wild because she's jealous.
 Mothers are always jealous when their sons
 Bring home a bride ; though she needn't be uneasy :
 I'd never interfere . . .

BELL. Too wise to put
 Your fingers 'twixt the cleaver and the block ?
 Jealous—I wonder ? Anyhow it seems

I've got a daughter too. Alone, you say ?
 However long I stayed, I'd have to go
 Alone at last ; and I'd as lief be gone
 While I can carry myself on my two pins.
 Being buried with the Barrasfords is a chance
 I've little mind to risk a second time :
 I'm too much of a Haggard to want to rise
 At the last trump among a flock of bleaters.
 If I've my way, there'll be stampeding hoofs
 About me, startled at the crack of doom.

MICHAEL. When you've done play-acting . . .

BELL. Play-acting ? Ay, I'm through :

Exit the villain : ring the curtain down
 On the happy ending—bride and bridegroom seated
 On either side the poor, but pious, hearth.

MICHAEL. I'd as soon argue with a weathercock
 As with a woman . . .

BELL. Yet the weathervanes
 Are always cocks, not hens.

MICHAEL. You shall not go.

BELL. Your naked hurdles cannot hold the wind.

MICHAEL. Wind ? Ay, I'm fairly tewed and hattered with
 words ;

And yet, for all your wind, you shall not go.

BELL. While you've a roof to shelter me, eh, son ?
 You mean well ; and you understand so little.
 Yours is a good thick fleece—no skin that twitches
 When a breath tickles it. Sheep will be sheep,
 And horses, horses, till the Day of Judgement.

MICHAEL. Better a sound tup than a spavined nag.

BELL. Ay, Ruth, you've kindled him ! Good luck to you ;
 And may your hearth-fire warm you to the end.

(To MICHAEL)

You've been a good son to me, in your way :
 Only our ways are different, and here they part.
 For all my blether, there's no bitterness
 On my side : I've long kenned 'twas bound to come :
 And in your heart you know it's for the best,
 For your sake and for Ruth's sake and for mine.
 I couldn't obey, where I have bid, nor risk
 My own son's fathering me in second childhood :
 And you'd not care to have me like old Ezra,

A dothering haiveril in your chimney-corner
 Babbling of vanished gold ? I read my fortune
 In the flames just now—and I'll not rot to death :
 It's time enough to moulder, underground.
 My death'll come quick and chancy, as I'd have had
 Each instant of life : but still there are risky years
 Before me, and a sudden unlooked-for ending.
 And I'll not haunt you—ghosts enough, with Ezra
 Counting his golden sovereigns all night long,
 And old Eliza darning ghostly stockings.
 My ghost will ride a broomstick . . .

*(As she speaks, the inner door opens, and RUTH and
 MICHAEL, turning sharply at the click of the latch, gaze
 dumbfounded at JUDITH ELLERSHAW standing in the
 doorway.)*

BELL.

Fee-fo-fum !

The barguest bays ; and boggles, brags and bo-los
 Follow the hunt ! How's that for witchcraft, think you ?
 Hark, how the lych-owl screeches !

RUTH *(running to her mother's arms)*. Mother, you !

BELL. Now there's a sweet domestic picture for you !
 My cue's to vanish in a puff of smoke
 And reek of brimstone, like the witch I am.
 I'm coming, hoolet, my old cat with wings !
 It's time I was away : there never yet
 Was room for two grandmothers in one house.
 I'm through with Krindlesyke. Good-bye, old gaol !

*[While MICHAEL still gazes at RUTH and her mother
 in amazement, BELL HAGGARD slips out of the
 door unnoticed, and away through the bracken in
 the gathering dusk. An owl hoots.]*

PART III

*A wet afternoon in May, six years later. The table is already set
 for tea. JUDITH ELLERSHAW sits knitting by the hearth, a
 cradle with a young baby in it by her side. The outer door is
 closed, but unlatched. Presently the unkempt head of a man
 appears furtively at the window, then vanishes. The door is
 pushed stealthily open, and JIM BARRASFORD, ragged and dis-
 reputable (and some twenty years older than when he married*

PHOEBE MARTIN), *stands on the threshold a moment, eyeing JUDITH'S unconscious back in silence: then he speaks, limping towards her chair.*

JIM. While the cat callevers the hills of Back-o'-Beyont
The rats make free of the rick—and so you doubled,
As soon as my hurdies were turned on Krindlesyke,
And settled yourself in the ingle?

JUDITH (*starting up and facing him*). Jim!

JIM.

Ay, Jim—

No other, Judith. I'll be bound you weren't
Just looking to see me: you seem overcome
By the unexpected pleasure. Your pardon, mistress,
If I intrude. By crikes! But I'm no ghost
To set you adither: you don't see anything wrong—
No, no! What should you see? I startled you.
Happen I look a wee bit muggerish-like—
A ragtag hipplety-clinch: but I've been travelling
Mischancy roads, and I'm fair muggert-up.
Yet why should that stagnate you? Where's the sense
Of expecting a mislucket man like me
To be as snod and spruce as a young shaver?
But I'm all right: there's naught amiss with Jim,
Except too much of nothing in his belly.
A good square meal and a pipe and a decent night's rest,
And I'll be as fit as a fiddle. I've hardly slept . . .
Well, now I'm home, I'll make myself at home.

(*He seizes the loaf of bread from the table, hacks off a hunch with his jack-knife, and wolfs it ravenously.*)

JUDITH. Home? You've come home, Jim?

JIM.

Nay, I'm my own fetch!

God's truth! there's little else but skin and bone
Beneath these tatters: just a two-legged boggart,
With naught but wind to fill my waim—small wonder
You're mazelt to see a scarecrow stottering in,
For plovers' eggs and heather-broth don't sleek
A wrinkled hide or swell a scrankit belly.
But still, what should there be to flabbergast you
About a man's returning to his home?
Naught wrong in coming home, I hope? By gox,
A poor lad can't come home but he's cross-questioned
And stared at like . . . Why do you stare like that?

It's I should be agape to find you here :
 But no, I'm not surprised ; you can't surprise me :
 I'm a travelled man ; I've seen the world, and so
 Don't look for gratitude. My eyes were opened
 Once and for all by you and Phoebe that day—
 Nigh twenty years since ; and they've not been shut . . .
 By gum, that's so ! it seems like twenty year
 Since I'd a wink of sleep . . . And anyway,
 I've heard the story, all the goings-on—
 And a pretty tale it is ; for I'd a drink,
 A sappy-crack with that old windywallops,
 Sep Shanks, in a bar at Bellingham ; and he let out
 How you'd crawled back to Krindlesyke with your daughter—
 Our daughter, I should say—and she, no less,
 Married to Peter's son : though how the deuce
 You picked him up is more than I can fashion.
 Sep had already had his fill of cheerers
 Before I met him, and that last rum-hot
 Was just the drop too much ; and he got fuddled.
 Ay, Sep was mortal-clay, the addled egg ;
 And I couldn't make head or tail of his hiccuping,
 Though he tried to make himself plain ; he did his best,
 Did Sep : I'll say that for him—tried so hard
 To make himself plain, he got us both chucked out ;
 And I left him in the gutter, trying still.

JUDITH. You've come from Bellingham hiring ?

JIM.

I couldn't stand

The dindum, felt fair-clumpered in that cluther—
 Such a hubblyshew of gowks and flirtigigs
 Craking and cackling like a gabble of geese :
 And folk kept looking—I might have been a bizen,
 The way they gaped ; so I thought I'd just win home
 For a little peace and quiet. Where's my daughter
 And this young cuckoo, calls himself my nephew,
 And has made himself free and easy of my nest ?
 Ay, but you've fettled things nicely, the lot of you,
 While I tramped the hungry roads. He's pinched my job ;
 But I bear no grudge : it's not a job I'm after,
 Since I've a married daughter I can live with.
 I've seen the world, a sight too much ; and I mean
 To settle down and end my days in peace
 In my old home.

JUDITH. Your home ? But you can't stay here.

JIM. You'll see ! Now that I'm home, I mean to clag
Like a cleaver to a flagstone : they'll have to lift
The hearth to get me out of Krindlesyke.
I've had enough of travelling the turnpike,
Houffling and hirpling like a cadging faa ;
And, but for you and your brat, I'd settled down,
A respectable married man, this twenty year.
But you shan't drive me from my home again.

JUDITH. We drove you ?

JIM. You began it, anyway—
Made me an April-gowk and laughing-stock,
Till I couldn't stand the neighbours' fleers. By joes !
You diddled me out of house and home among you ;
And settled yourselves couthily in my calf-yard
Like maggots in a muckheap, while I went cawdrife.
But I've had my fill of it, Judith, Hexham-measure :
I'm home for good : and isn't she my daughter ?
You stole her from me once, when you made off
With hoity-toity Phoebe—ay, I ken
She died : I learned it at the time—you sneaked
My only bairn—I cannot mind her name,
If ever I heard it : you kept even that
From me, her dad. But, anyway, she's mine :
I've only her and you to turn to now :
A poor lone widower I've been any time
This twenty year—that's what's been wrong with me,
Though it hadn't entered my noddle till this minute.
But where's the canny couple ?

JUDITH. Ruth and Michael
Are at the hiring.

JIM. Well, I'll not deny
That suits my book. I'd a notion, Judith, lass,
I'd find you alone and make my peace with you
Before I tackled the young folk. Poor relations
Aren't made too welcome in this ungrateful world—
Least so by those who've taken the bread from their mouths
And beggared them of bit and brat : and so
I thought 'twould be more couthy-like with you,
Just having a crack and talking old times over,
Till I was more myself. I don't like strangers,
Not even when they're my own flesh and blood :

They've got a trick of staring at a man ;
 And all I want is to be let alone—
 Just let alone . . . By God, why can't they let me
 Alone ! But you are kind and comfortable ;
 And you won't heckle me and stare at me :
 For I'm not quite myself ; I'll own to that—
 I'm not myself . . . though who the devil I am
 I hardly ken . . . I've been that hunted and harried.

JUDITH. Hunted ?

JIM. Ay, Judith—in a manner of speaking,
 Hunted's the word : and I'm too old for the sport.
 I'm getting on in years ; and you're no younger
 Than when I saw you last—you mind the day,
 My wedding-day ? A fine fligarishon
 You made of it between you, you and Phoebe :
 And wasn't she the high and mighty madam,
 The niffy-naffy don't-come-nigh-me nonesuch ?
 But I've forgiven her : I bear no malice.

JUDITH. You bear no malice ? And she died of it !

JIM. Ay, ay, she showed some sense of decency
 In that at least—though she got her sting in first
 Like an angry bee. But, Judith, doesn't it seem
 We two were tokened to end our days together ?
 Nothing can keep us parted, seemingly :
 So let bygones be bygones.

(Catching sight of the cradle.)

What, another !

Have you always got a brat about you, Judith ?
 Last time you sprang a daughter on me, and now . . .
 But I'm forgetting how the years have flitted.
 Don't tell me I'm a grandfather ?

JUDITH. The boy
 Is Ruth's.

JIM. Well, I've come into a family,
 And no mistake—a happy family :
 And I was born to be a family-man.
 They'll never turn against their bairn's granddad :
 And I'm in luck.

JUDITH. You cannot bide here, Jim.

JIM. And who the hell are you to say me nay ?

JUDITH. The boy's grandmother.

JIM. Ay, and so the granddam's
To sit in the ingle-neuk while granddad hoofs it?

JUDITH. When you left Krindlesyke, you quitted it
For good and all.

JIM. And yet I'm here again,
Unless I'm dreaming. It seems we all come back
To Krindlesyke like martins to the byre-baulks :
It draws us back—can't keep away, nohow.
Ay, first and last the old gaol is my home.
You're surely forgetting . . .

JUDITH. I'm forgetting nothing.
It's you've the knack of only recollecting
What you've a mind to. How could you have come
If you remembered all these walls have seen?

JIM. So walls have eyes as well as ears? I can't
Get away from eyes . . . But they'll not freeze my blood
Or stare me out of countenance : they've no tongues
To tittle-tattle ; they're no tell-tale-tits,
No slinking skeadlicks, nosing and sniffing round,
To wink and nod when I turn my back, collouging
With heads together to lay me by the heels.
Nay, I'm not fleyed of a bit of whitewashed plaister.
But you're a nice one to welcome home a traveller
With "cannots" and clavers of eyes. Why can't you let
Things rest, and not hark back, routing things out
And casting them in my teeth? Why must you lug
The dead to light—dead days? . . . I'm not afraid
Of corpses : the dead are dead : their eyes are shut—
Leastways they cannot glower when once the mould's
Atop of them . . . though they follow a chap round the room,
Seeking the coppers to clap them to . . . dead eyes
Can't wink—and twopence shuts their bravest stare.
So ghosts won't trouble my rest at Krindlesyke.
I vowed that I'd sleep sound at Krindlesyke
When I . . .

JUDITH. You cannot bide.

JIM. I bear no malice.
Why can't you let bygones be bygones? But that's
A woman all over—must be raking up
The ashes into a glow, and puffing them red
To roast a man for what he did or didn't
Twenty year syne. Why should you still bear malice?

JUDITH. I bear no malice : but you cannot bide.

JIM. Why do you keep cuckooing "cannot, cannot" ?
And who's to turn me out of Krindlesyke,
Where I was born and bred, I'd like to ken ?
You can't gainsay it's my home.

JUDITH. Not your home now.

JIM. Then who the devil's home . . .

JUDITH. It's Ruth's and Michael's.

JIM. My daughter's and her man's : their home's my home.

JUDITH. You shall not stay.

JIM. It's got to "shall not" now ?

The cuckoo's changed his tune, but I can't say
I like the new note better—it's too harsh ;
The gowk's grown croupy. But, lass, I never thought
You'd be harsh with me : yet even you've turned raspy . . .
First "cannot," then . . .

JUDITH. Nay ! I'll not have their home
Pulled down about their ears by any man,
And least of all by you—the home they've made . . .

JIM. Stolen, I'd say.

JUDITH. Together, for themselves .
And their three boys.

JIM. Jim, granddad three times over ?
It's well you broke it piecemeal : the old callant's
A waffly heart, and any sudden joy
Just sets it twittering : but the more the merrier !

JUDITH. You shall not wreck their happiness. I'd not
dreamed

Such happiness as theirs could be in this world.
Since it was built, there's not been such a home
At Krindlesyke : it's only been a house . . .

JIM. 'Twas just about as homely as a hearse
In my young days : but my luck's turned, it seems.

JUDITH. It takes more than four walls to make a home,
And such a home as Michael's made for Ruth.
Though she's a fendy lass, she's too like me,
And needs a helpmate, or she'll waste herself ;
And with another man she might have wrecked
Instead of building. She's got her man, her mate :
Husband and father born, day in, day out,
He works to keep a home for wife and weans.
There's never been a luckier lass than Ruth—

Though she deserves it too : and it's but seldom
 Good lasses are the lucky ones ; and few
 Get their deserts in this life.

JIM. True, egox !

JUDITH. Few, good or bad. But Ruth has everything—
 A home, a steady husband, and her boys.
 There never were such boys.

JIM. A pretty picture—
 It takes my fancy : and the dear old grannie—
 Why do you leave her out ? And there's a corner
 For granddad in it, surely—an arm-chair
 On the other side of the ingle, with a pipe
 And packet of twist, and a pot of nappy beer,
 Hot-fettled four-ale, handy on the hob ?
 Ay, there's the chair : I'd best secure it now.

*(As he seats himself with his back to the door, the head of
 BELL HAGGARD, in her flame-coloured kerchief, peeps
 round the jamb, then slowly withdraws, unseen of JIM
 or JUDITH.)*

JIM. Fetch up the swipes and shag. I can reach the cutty . . .
*(He takes down MICHAEL'S pipe from the mantelshelf,
 and sticks it between his teeth ; but JUDITH snatches at it,
 breaking the stem, and flings the bowl on the fire.)*

JUDITH. And you, to touch his pipe !
*(JIM stares at her, startled, as she stands before him with
 drawn face and set teeth ; then, still eyeing her uneasily,
 begins to bluster.)*

JIM. You scarting randy !
 I'll teach you manners. That's a good three-halfpence
 Smashed into smithereens—and all for nothing.
 I've lammed a wench for less. I've half a mind
 To snap you like the stopple, you yacky-yaa !
 De'il rive your sark ! It's long since I've had the price
 Of a clay in my pouch ; and I'm half-dead for a puff.
 What's taken you ? What's set you agee with me ?
 You used to like me, and you always seemed
 A menseful body, and I lippeden to you.
 But you're just a wheepie-leekie weathercock
 Like the lave of women, when a man's mislucket,
 Moidart and mismeaved and beside himself.
 I fancied I'd be in clover at Krindlesyke,
 With you and all : but, sink me if I haven't

Just stuck my silly head into a bee-bike !
 What's turned you vicious ? I only want to smoke
 A cutty in peace ; and you go on the rampage.
 I mustn't smoke young master's pipe it seems—
 His pipe, no less ! Young cock-a-ride-a-roosie
 Is on the muckheap now, and all the hens
 Are clucking round him. I ken what it is :
 The cockmadendy's been too easy with you.
 It doesn't do to let you women folk
 Get out of hand. It's time I came, i' faiks,
 To pull you up, and keep you in your place.
 I'll have no naggers narr-narring all day long :
 I'll stand no fantigues. If the cull's too soft . . .

JUDITH. Soft, did you say ? I've seen him hike a man,
 And a heftier man than you, over a dyke
 For yarking a lame beast. That drover'll mind—
 Ay, to his dying day he'll not forget
 He once ran into something hard.

JIM. Ay, ay . . .
 He's that sort, is he ? My luck is out again.
 I want a quiet life, to be let alone ;
 And Krindlesyke won't be a bed of roses
 With that sort ramping round. (*Starting uneasily.*)
 What's that ? I thought . . .

There's no one in the other room, is there ?
 I've a feeling in my bones somebody's listening.
 You've not deceived me, Judith ? You've not trapped . . .
 I'm all aswither, sweating like a brock.
 I little dreamt you'd turn against me, Judith :
 But even here I don't feel safe now.

JUDITH. Safe ?

JIM. So you don't know ? I fancied every one kenned—
 Else why the devil should they stare like that ?
 And when you too looked . . . Nay, how could you learn ?
 I'm davered surely : Seppy Shanks's rum
 Has gone to my noddle : drink's the very devil
 On an empty waim ; and I never had a head.
 What have I done ? Ay, wouldn't you like to ken,
 To holler on the hounds ?

JUDITH. Jim !

JIM. But what matter
 Whether you ken or not ? You've done for me

Already, dang you, with your hettle tongue :
 You've put the notion in my head the curs
 Are on my scent ; and now I cannot rest.
 Happen they're slinking now up Bloodysyke
 Like adders through the bent . . . Nay, they don't yelp,
 The hounds that sleuth me : it's only in my head
 I hear the yapping : they're too cunning to yelp,
 The sleichers slither after me on their bellies
 As dumb and slick as adders . . . But I'm doitered
 And doting like a doobby. I want to sleep . . .
 A good night's rest would pull my wits together.
 I swore I'd sleep . . . but I couldn't close an eye now
 Since . . .

JUDITH. Jim, what ails you ? Tell me what you've done.
 I'm sorry, Jim . . .

JIM. I swear I never set out
 To do it, Judith ; and the thing was done
 Before I came to my senses—that's God's truth,
 And may hell blast . . . You're sorry ? Nay, but Jim's
 Too old a bird to be caught with chaff. You're fly ;
 But Jim's fly too. No, mum's the word.

JUDITH. O Jim,
 You surely never think I'd . . .

JIM. I don't know.
 A man in my case can't tell who to trust
 When every mongrel's yowling for his carcase.
 Mum's my best friend, the only one . . . though whiles
 It's seemed even he had blabbered out my secrets
 And hollered them to rouse the countryside,
 And draw all eyes on me. But I must mizzle.

JUDITH. You're going, Jim ?

JIM. I'll not be taken here
 Like a brock in his earth : I'll not be trapped and torn . . .
 Yet I don't know. Why should I go ? No worse
 To be taken here than elsewhere—and I'm dead beat :
 I'm all to rovers, my wit's all gone agate :
 And how can I travel in these boots ? A week since
 The soles bid a fond farewell to the uppers : I've been
 Hirpling it barefoot—ay, kind lady, barefoot.
 You'd hardly care to be in my shoes, Judith ?
 While you've been sitting doose . . .

JUDITH. I've known the road ;
 I've trudged it too, lad : and your feet are bleeding.
 I'll bathe them for you, Jim, before you go ;
 And you shall have a pair of Michael's boots.

JIM. So I may have young master's cast-off boots
 Since he's stepped into my shoes—a fair swap !
 And tug my forelock like a lousy tinker,
 And whine God bless the master of this house,
 Likewise the mistress too. . . . By gox, I've come
 To charity—Jim Barrasford's come to mooch
 For charity at Krindlesyke ! Shanks's mare's
 A sorry nag at best, and lets you down
 Sooner or later for certain—the last straw,
 When a man can't trust his feet, and his own legs
 Give under him in his need, and bring him down
 A devasher in the ditch as the dogs are on him !
 You're sorry ? I don't know. How can I tell ?
 You're sly, you faggit, but don't get over Jim
 With jookery-pawkery, Judith : I may be mazelt,
 But I've a little rummelgumption left—
 I still ken a bran from a brimmer, bless your heart !
 It suits you to get rid of me, and you judge
 It's cheaply done at the price of a pair of tackities.
 Nay, I'll be taken here.

JUDITH. You cannot stay.

JIM. Do you take me for a cangling cadger to haggle . . .
 Forgimety ! I cannot . . . God's truth, I dare not !
 You've got me on the hop and I must hirple :
 But, if I go, I will not go alone :
 I've a mind to have a partner for this polka.

JUDITH. Alone ? And who do you think that . . .

JIM. Who but you ?

JUDITH. I !

JIM. If I've got to take the road again,
 You've got to pad it with me, for I'm tired
 Of travelling lonesome : I've a mind to have
 My doxy with me. By crikes ! I'm fleyed to face
 The road again alone . . . You'll come . . .

JUDITH. I cannot.
 How could I leave . . .

JIM. Then I'll be taken here :
 You'll be to blame.

JUDITH. But, Jim, how could I leave . . .

JIM. The sooner it's over, the better I'll be pleased.

JUDITH. You mustn't stop—and yet I cannot go.

How could I leave the bairn ?

JIM. The brat's asleep.

JUDITH. It won't sleep long.

JIM. Its mammy'll soon be home.

JUDITH. Not for three hours, at earliest.

JIM. Then I'll wait

Till then : they can't be on my track so soon :

And when its dad and mammy come back . . .

JUDITH. Nay, nay :

They mustn't find you here.

JIM. Judith, you're right ;

For they might blab. I'd best be hooking it.

I'll go : but, mind, you've not got shot of me.

(As he is speaking, BELL HAGGARD appears in the doorway and stands with arms akimbo, watching them ; but JIM has his back to the door, and JUDITH, gazing into the fire, does not see her either.)

JIM. I'll wait for you beneath the Gallows Rigg

Where the burn skirts the planting, in the slack

We trysted in in the old days—do you mind ?

JUDITH. I mind.

JIM. Trust you for that ! And I'll lie low—

It's a dry bottom : and when the family's snoring

You'll come to me. Just whicker like a peesweep

Three times, and I'll be with you in a jiffy.

We'll take the road together, bonnie lass ;

For we were always marrows, you and I.

If only that flirtigig, Phoebe, hadn't come

Between me and my senses, we'd have wed

And settled down at Krindlesyke for life :

But now we've got to hoof it to the end.

My sang ! 'twill be a honeymoon for me

After the rig I've run. But hearken, Judith—

If you don't turn up by ten o'clock, I'll come

And batter on that door to wake the dead—

I'll make such a rumpus, such a Bob's-a-dying,

Would rouse you if you were straked. I'll have you with me

If I've got to carry you chested—sink my soul !

And, for all I care, that luggish slubberdegullion

May lounder my hurdies, and go to Hecklebarney !
 I'm desperate, Judith . . . and I don't mind much . . .
 But you'll come, lass ?

JUDITH. I'll come.

JIM. Well, if you fail
 They'll take me here as sure as death.

BELL (*stepping forward*). That's so.

JIM (*wheeling round*). The devil !

BELL. Nay, not yet—all in good time.
 But I question they'll wait till ten o'clock : they seemed
 Impatient for your company—deuce kens why :
 But then what's one man's meat . . .

JIM. What's that you say ?

BELL. They seemed dead-set . . . You needn't jump like
 that—

I haven't got the bracelets in my pocket.

JIM. And who the hell are you ? and what do you mean ?

BELL. You've seen my face before.

JIM. Ay—ay . . . I've seen it :

But I don't know your name. You dog my heels :
 I've seen your face . . . I saw it on that night—
 That night . . . and sink me, but I saw it last
 In the bar at Bellingham—your eyes were on me.
 Ay, and I've seen that phisog many times ;
 And it always brought ill-luck.

BELL. It hasn't served
 Its owner so much better—yet it's my fortune,
 Though I'm no peachy milkmaid. Ay, I fancied
 'Twas you they meant.

JIM. Who meant ?

BELL. How should I know ?
 You should ken best who's after you, and what
 You're wanted for ? They might be friends of yours,
 For all I ken—though I've never taken, myself,
 To the little boy-blues. But, carties, I'd have fancied
 'Twould make your lugs burn—such a gillaber about you.
 They talked . . .

JIM. Who talked ?

BELL. Your friends.

JIM. Friends ? I've no friends.

BELL. Well, they were none of mine. Last night I slept
 'Neath Winter's Stob . . .

JIM. What's that to do with me ?

BELL. I slept till midnight, when a clank of chains
Awakened me ; and, looking up, I saw
A body on the gibbet . . .

JIM. A body, woman ?
No man's hung there this hundred year.

BELL. I saw
A tattered corpse against the haggling moon,
Above me black.

JIM. You didn't see the face ?

BELL. I saw its face—before it disappeared
And left the gibbet bare.

JIM. You kenned the face ?

BELL. I kenned the face.

JIM. Whose face ?

BELL. Best not to ask.

JIM. O Christ !

BELL. But we were talking of your friends—
Quite anxious about you they seemed.

JIM (*limping towards BELL HAGGARD with uplifted arm*).

You cadger-quean !

You've set them on. I'll crack you over the cruntle—
You rummel-dusty . . . you muckhut . . . you windyhash !
I'll slit your weazen for you : I'll break your jaw—
I'll stop your gob, if I've to do you in !
You'll not sleep under Winter's Stob to-night.

BELL (*regarding him, unmoved*). As well be hanged for a
sheep as for a lamb ?

JIM (*stopping short*). Hanged ?

BELL. To be hanged by the neck till you are dead.
That bleaches you ? But you'll look whiter yet,
When you lie cold and stiffening, my pretty bleater.

JIM (*shrinking back*). You witch . . . You witch ! You've
got the evil eye.

Don't look at me like that . . . Come, let me go !

BELL. A witch ? Ay, wise men always carry witchbane
When they've to do with women. Witch, say you ?
Eh, lad, but you've been walking widdershins :
You'd best turn deazil, crook your thumbs, my callant,
And gather cowgrass, if you'd break the spell
And send the old witch skiting on her broomstick.
They said that you'd make tracks for Krindlesyke ;

And they'd cop you here for certain—dig you out
Like a badger from his earth. I left them talking.

JIM. Where, you hell-hag?

BELL. Ah, where? You'd like to learn?
It's well to keep a civil tongue with witches,
If you've no sliver of rowan in your pocket—
Though it won't need any witch, my jackadandy,
To clap the clicking jimmes round your wrists.
To think I fashed myself to give you warning—
And this is all the thanks I get! Well, well—
They'll soon be here. As I came up Bloodysyke . . .

JIM. Up Bloodysyke—and they were following?
I'd best cut over Gallows Rigg. My God!
The hunt's afoot . . . But it may be a trap—
And you . . . and you . . .

BELL. Nay, but I'm no ratcatcher.
You'd best turn tail before the terriers sight you.

(As JIM bolts past her through the open door)

Rats! Rats! Good dog!—And now we're rid of vermin.

JUDITH. Oh, Bell, what has he done? What has he
done?

BELL. How should I ken?

JUDITH. And yet you said . . .

BELL. I said?

You've surely not forgotten Bell Haggard's tongue
After the taste you had of it the last time?

JUDITH. What did you hear?

BELL. A drunken bletherbrecks

In a bar at Bellingham; and I recognised
Peter's own brother too, guessed it was Jim:
And when they gossiped of Krindlesyke . . . Oh, I ken
Ladies don't listen—but not being a lady
Whiles has advantages: and when he left
His crony sprawling, splurging in the gutter,
I followed him, full-pelt, hot on his heel,
Guessing the hannel was up to little good.
But he got here before me: so I waited
Outside until I heard him blustering,
And judged it time to choke his cracking-croose.
I couldn't have that wastrel making mischief
In Michael's house. I didn't quit Krindlesyke
That it might be turned into a tinker's doss-house,

For any hammy, halfnabs and hang-gallows
To stretch his lowsy carcase in at ease,
After I'd slutted to keep it respectable
For fifteen year.

JUDITH. But what do you think he's done—
Not murder ?

BELL. Murder ? Nay, it takes a man
To murder.

JUDITH. Ay . . . But when you spoke of hanging,
He turned like death ; and when he threatened you
I saw blue murder in his eyes.

BELL. At most,
'Twould be manslaughter with the likes of him.
I've some respect for murderers—they at least
Take things into their own hands, and don't wait
On lucky chances like the rest of us—
Murderers and suicides . . .

JUDITH. But Jim ?

BELL. I'd back
Cain against Abel, ay, and hairy Esau
Against that smooth sneak, Jacob. Jim ? He's likely
Done in some doxy in a drunken sleep !
'Twould be about his measure.

JUDITH. Jim—O Jim !

BELL. Nay, he'll not dangle in a hempen noose.

JUDITH. And yet you saw his body . . .

BELL. Dead men's knuckles !
You didn't swallow that gammon ? Why should I
Be sleeping under Winter's Stob ? But Jim—
I doubt if he'd the guts to stick a porker :
You needn't fear for him. But I must go.

JUDITH. Go ? You'll not go without a cup of tea
After you've traiked so far ? Michael and Ruth . . .

BELL. Ay, Judith, I just caught a squint of them
Among the cluther outside the circus-tent :
But I was full-tilt on Jim's track then, and so
I couldn't daunder, or I'd have stopped to have
A closer look : yet I saw that each was carrying
A little image of a Barrasford :

(Looking into the cradle) .

And here's the reckling image seemingly—
The sleeping spit of Michael at his age.

JUDITH. You never saw such laleeking lads—and they
All fashion after their father.

BELL. I'm glad I came.
Even if I'd not struck Jim, I'd meant to come
And have a prowling round the old gaol, and see
How Michael throve ; although I hadn't ettled
To cross the doorstone—just to come and go,
And not a soul the wiser. But it turns out
I was fated to get here in the nick of time :
It seems the old witch drew me here once more
To serve her turn and save the happy home.
I judged you'd lost your hold on me, Eliza—
But once a ghost has got a grip of you
It won't let go its clutch on your life until
It's dragged you into the grave with it : even then . . .
Although my ghost should prove a match for any,
I'd fancy, with a fair field and no favour !
But ghosts and graves ! I'm down-in-the-mouth to-day :
I must have supped off toadstools on a tombstone,
Or happen the droppy weather makes me dyvous—
I never could thole the mooth and muggy mizzle
Seeping me sodden : I'd liefer it teemed whole-water,
A sousing, drooking downpour anytime.
I'm dowf and blunkit, why, deuce only kens !
It seems as if Eliza had me fey,
And that old witch would be the death of me—
And these white walls . . . 'Twould be the queerest start !
But, Michael's happy ?

JUDITH. He's the best of husbands—
The best of fathers : he . . .

BELL. I ken, I ken.
Well . . . He's got what he wanted, anyway.

JUDITH. And you ?

BELL. Ay . . . I was born to take my luck.
But I must go.

JUDITH. You'll not wait for them ?

BELL. Nay,
I'm dead to them : I've bid good-bye to them
Till Doomsday ; and I'm through with Krindlesyke
This time, I hope—though you can never tell.
I hadn't ettled to darken the door again—
Yet here I am : and, even now, the walls

Seem closing . . . It would be the queerest start
 If, after all . . . But, dod, I've got the dismals,
 And no mistake ! I'm in the dowie dumps,
 Maundering and moonging like a spancelled cow :
 It's over dour and dern for me in this loaning
 On a dowly day. Best pull myself together
 And put my best foot forward before darkening :
 And I've no mind to meet them on the road.
 So long !

[She goes out of the door and makes down the syke.]

JUDITH. Good-bye ! If you'd only bide a while . . .
 Come back ! You mustn't go like that . . . Bell, Bell !

(She breaks off, as BELL HAGGARD is already out of hearing, and stands watching her till she is out of sight ; then turns, closing the door, and sinks into a chair in an abstracted fashion. She takes up her knitting mechanically, but sits motionless, brooding by the fire.)

JUDITH. To think that Jim—and after all these years . . .
 And then to come like that ! I wonder what . . .
 I wish he hadn't gone without the boots.

(She resumes her knitting, musing in silence, until she is roused by the click of the latch. The door opens and BELL HAGGARD stumbles into the room, and sinks to the floor in a heap. Her brow is bleeding, and her dress torn and dishevelled.)

JUDITH *(starting up)*. Bell ! What has happened, woman ?
 Are you hurt ?

Oh, but your brow is bleeding !

BELL.

I'd an inkling

There must be blood somewhere—I seemed to smell it.

JUDITH. But what has happened, Bell ? Don't say 'twas Jim !

BELL. Nay . . . nay . . . it wasn't Jim . . . I stumbled, Judith :
 And seemingly I cracked my cruntle a bit—
 It's Jill fell down and cracked her crown, this journey.
 I smelt the blood . . . but it's not there, the pain . . .
 It's in my side . . . I must have dunched my side
 Against a stone in falling . . . I could fancy
 A rib or, so's gone smash.

JUDITH *(putting an arm about her and helping her to rise)*.

Come and lie down,

And I'll see what . . .

BELL. Nay, but I'll not lie down :
 I'm not that bad . . . and anyhow I swore
 I'd not lie down again at Krindlesyke.
 If I lay down the walls would close in on me
 And scrunch the life out . . . But I'm hivering—
 Craitching and craking like a doitered crone . . .
 Lightheaded from the tumble . . . mother-wit's
 Jirbled and jumbled . . . I came such a flam.
 I'm not that bad . . . I say I'll not lie down . . .
 Just let me rest a moment by the hearth
 Until . . .

(JUDITH leads her to a chair, fetches a basin of water and
 some linen, and bathes the wound on BELL'S brow.)

JUDITH. I wish . . .

BELL. I'm better here. I'll soon
 Be fit again . . . Bell isn't done for yet :
 She's a tough customer—she's always been
 A banging, bobberous bletherskite, has Bell—
 No fushenless, brashy, mim-mouthed mealy-face,
 Fratished and perished in the howl-o'-winter.
 No wind has ever blown too etherish,
 Too snell to fire her blood : she's always relished
 A gorly gousty blusterous day that sets
 Her wits alow and birselling like a whin-fire.
 But what a windyhash ! My wit's wool-gathering,
 And I'm waffling like a . . . But I'd best be stepping
 Before he comes : I've far to travel to-night ;
 And I'm not so young . . . And Michael mustn't find
 His tinker mother squatted by the hearth,
 Nursing a bloody head. But, mind you, Judith,
 I stumbled ; and I hurt my side in falling :
 Whatever they may say, you stick to that ;
 Swear that I told you that upon my oath—
 So help me God and all, my Bible-oath.
 I'm better . . . already . . . I fancy . . . and I'll go
 Before . . . What was I saying ? Well, old hob,
 I little ettled I'd look on you again.
 The times I've polished you, the elbow-grease
 I've wasted on you ! But I never made
 You shine like that . . . You're winking red eyes at me—
 And well you may to see . . . I little guessed
 You'd see me sitting . . . I've watched many fires

Since last I sat beside this hearth—good fires,
 Coal, coke and peat, but wood-fires in the main.
 There's naught like izles for dancing flames and singing :
 Birch kindles best and has the liveliest flames,
 But elm just smoulders—it's the coffin-wood . . .
 Coffins ? Who muttered coffins ? Let's not talk
 Of coffins, Judith. . . . Shut in a black box !
 They couldn't keep old Ezra in—the lid
 Flew off and old granddaddy sat up girning . . .
 They had to screw him down . . . And Solomon
 Slept with his fathers . . . I wonder he could sleep
 After the razzle-dazzle . . . Concubines !
 'Twould take a pyramid to keep him down !
 And me . . . That tumble's cracked the bell . . . not stopped
 The crazy clapper, seemingly. . . . But coffins—
 Let's talk no more of coffins ? What have I
 To do with coffins ? Let us talk of fires :
 I've always loved a fire : I'd set the world
 Alow for my delight, if it would burn.
 It's such a soggy sodden world to-day,
 I'm duberous I could kindle it with an izle :
 It might just sinoulder with muckle funeral-plumes
 Of smoke, like coffin-elder . . . And the blaze—
 The biggest flare-up ever I set eyes on,
 It was a kind of funeral, you might say—
 A fiery, flaming, roaring funeral,
 A funeral such as I . . . but no such luck
 For me in this world—likely in the next !
 And anyway it wouldn't be much fun
 If I couldn't watch it myself. . . . Ay, Long Nick Salkeld
 And his old woman, Zillah, died together
 The selfsame day, within an hour or so.
 'Twas on Spadeadam Waste we'd camped that time . . .
 And kenning how they'd loved their caravan,
 And how they'd hate to leave it or be parted
 From one another even by a foot of earth,
 We laid them out together side by side
 In the van, as they'd slept in it night after night
 For hard on fifty year. We took naught out
 And shifted naught—just burnished up the brasses
 Till they twinkled as Zillah'd kept them while she could . . .
 And so with not a coffin-board between them,

At dead of night we fired the caravan . . .
 The flames leapt up—and roaring to the stars
 As we stood round . . . the flames leapt up and roaring . . .
 I hear them roaring now . . . the flames . . . I hear . . .
 Flames roaring in my head . . . I hear . . . I hear . . .
 And flying izles . . . falling sparks . . . I hear
 Flames roaring . . . roaring . . . roaring . . .

(She sways forward but JUDITH catches her in her arms.)

Where am I? Judith, is that you?
 How did I come here, honey? But now I mind—
 I fell . . . He must have hidden in the heather
 To trip me up . . . He kicked me as I lay—
 The harrygad!

JUDITH. Jim!

BELL. Nay! What am I saying?
 I stumbled, Judith—you must stick to that,
 Whatever they may say . . . I stumbled, Judith.
 Think what would happen if they strung Jim up,
 Should I . . . You can't hang any man alone . . .
 Think what would happen should I . . . Don't you see
 We cannot let them string up Michael's uncle?
 Respectable . . . it wouldn't be respectable . . .
 And I . . . I slutted fifteen . . . I'd an inkling
 There must be blood somewhere . . . I thought I smelt it . . .
 And it tastes salt on the lips . . . It's choking me . . .
 It's fire and salt and candle-light for me
 This time, and Whinny Muir and Brig-o'-Dread . . .
 I'm done for, Judith . . . It's all up with me . . .
 It's been a fine ploy while it lasted. . . .

JUDITH. Come . . .

BELL. Life with a smack in it—death with a tang . . .

JUDITH. I'll help you into bed.

*(BELL HAGGARD gazes about her in a dazed fashion, as
 JUDITH ELLERSHAW raises her and supports her across
 the floor towards the inner room.)*

BELL. Bed, did you say?

Bed—it's not bedtime, is it?

*To bed, to bed,
 Says Sleepyhead:
 Tarry awhile, says Slow:
 Put on the pot
 Says Greedygut. . . .*

I swore

I'd not lie down . . . You cannot dodge your luck :

It had to be . . . And I must dree my weird.

When first I came to Krindlesyke I felt

These walls . . . these walls . . . They're closing on me now !

Let's sup before we go !

(They pass into the other room, but BELL HAGGARD'S voice still sounds through the open door.)

BELL.

Nay ! not that bed—

Eliza's bed ! The old witch lay in wait

For me . . . and now she has me ! Well, what odds ?

Jim called me witch—and the old spaewife and I

Should make the doose bedfellows after all.

Early to bed and early to rise . . . I've never

Turned in while I could wink an eye before :

I've always sat late . . . And I'd sit it out

Now . . . But I'm dizzy . . . And that old witch, Eliza—

I little guessed she'd play this cantrip on me—

But what a jest, Jerusalem, what a jest !

She must be chuckling, thinking how she's done me ;

And I could laugh, if it wasn't for the pain . . .

It doesn't do to rattle broken ribs—

But I could die of laughing, split my sides,

If they weren't split already. Yet my clapper

Keeps wagging, and I'm my own passing-bell—

They knew, who named me . . . Talking to gain time . . .

It's running out so quick . . . And mum's the word :

I mustn't rouse her . . . She sleeps couthily,

Free of the coil of cumber and trouble . . . I never

Looked on a lonelier face . . . The flames . . . the flames . . .

They're roaring to the stars . . . roaring . . . roaring . . .

The heather's all turned gold . . . and golden showers—

Izles and flying embers and falling stars . . .

Great flakes of fire . . . They've set the world alow . . .

It's all about me . . . blood-red in my eyes . . .

I'm burning . . . What have I to do with worms !

Burning . . . burning . . . burning . . .

(Her voice sinks to a low moaning which goes on for some time, then stops abruptly. After a while JUDITH comes into the living-room, fills a basin with water from a bucket and carries it into the other room. She returns with BELL HAGGARD'S flame-coloured handkerchief which she throws

on the fire, where it burns to a grey wisp. She then takes a night-dress and a white mutch from a drawer in the dresser and carries them into the other room, where she stays for some time. The baby in the cradle awakens and begins to whimper, till JUDITH comes out, shutting the door behind her, and takes it in her arms.)

JUDITH. Whisht, whisht, my canny hinny, my bonnie boy !
Your wee live body's good to cuddle after . . .
Whisht, whisht !

(Gazing into the fire.)

First Phoebe—and then, Bell . . . O Jim !
(Steps are heard on the threshold, and MICHAEL and RUTH enter, carrying their sleeping sons, NICHOLAS, aged five, and RALPH, aged three. They put down the children on the settle by the hearth, where they sit, dazed and silent, sleepily rubbing their eyes.)

RUTH. Well, I'm not sorry to be home again :
My arms are fairly broken.

MICHAEL. Ay, they're heavy.
The hoggerel you lift up turns a sheep
Before you set it down again. Well, Judith,
You've had a quiet day of it, I warrant ?

JUDITH *(in a low voice)*. Michael, your mother's here.

MICHAEL. My mother here ?

RUTH. I always fancied she'd turn up again,
In spite of all her raveling—Michael, you mind,
About a mutch with frills, and all thon havers ?
But where we are to put her I can't think :
There's not a bed for her.

JUDITH. She's on my bed.

RUTH. Your bed ? But you . . .

JUDITH. She's welcome to my bed
As long as she has need. She'll not lie long
Before they lift her.

MICHAEL. Judith !

RUTH. She's not dead ?

JUDITH. Ay, son, she breathed her last an hour ago.

RUTH. So, after all, the poor old soul crept back
To Kindlesyke to die.

(MICHAEL BARRASFORD, without a word, moves towards the inner room in a dazed manner, lifts the latch and goes in. After a moment's hesitation, RUTH follows him, closing

the door behind her. The boys, who have been sitting staring at the fire drowsily and unheeding, rouse themselves gradually, stretching and yawning.)

NICHOLAS. Grannie, we saw the circus ;

And Ralph still says he wants to be a herd

Like dad, but I can't bide the silly baas.

When I'm a man, I'll be a circus-rider

And gallop, gallop ! I'm clean daft on horses.

(An owl hoots piercingly without.)

RALPH. Grannie, what's that ?

JUDITH. Only an owl, son.

NICHOLAS. Bo !

Fearent of hoolets !

RALPH. I thought it was a bo-lo.

NICHOLAS. Bo-los or horneys or wirrakows can't scare me ;

And I like to hear the jinnyhoolets scritch—

It gives me such a queer cold creepy feeling.

I like to feel the shivers in my hair.

When I'm a man I'll ride the fells by moonlight

Like the mosstroopers when the owls are skirling.

They used to gallop on their gallowsays,

The reivers, dad says. . . .

(The owl calls again and is answered by its mate, and then they seem to be flying round and round Krindlesyke, hooting shrilly.)

RALPH. Oh, there it is again !

Grannie, I'm freckened. . . .

JUDITH. It's an ellerish yelling :

I never heard . . .

RALPH. What's in the other room ?

I want my dad and mammy.

JUDITH. You're over-tired.

Come, I'll undress you and tuck you into bed :

And you'll sleep sound, my lamb, as sound and snug

As a yeanning in a maud-neuk.

NICHOLAS. I'll ride ! I'll ride !

EPILOGUE

GHOSTS of my fathers, where you keep
On ghostly hills your ghostly sheep,
Should you a moment chance to turn
The pages of this book to learn
What trade your offspring's taken to,
Because my exiled heart is true
To your Northumbrian fells and you,
Forgive me that my flocks and herds
Are only barren bleating words.

KESTREL EDGE AND OTHER
PLAYS
(1924)

TO
PERCY WITHERS

LOVERS' LEAP

PERSONS

ANGUS EARNSHAW, *a young farmer.*

LUCY EARNSHAW, *his wife.*

RACHEL EARNSHAW, *his mother.*

ALEC EARNSHAW, *his brother.*

ESTHER BURN

ADAH BURN, *her younger sister* } *farm servants.*

SCENE I

SCENE.—*The kitchen of Windwhistle, a Border farmstead, on the evening of May term-day : LUCY EARNSHAW at the table in the middle of the room, ironing : RACHEL EARNSHAW sitting by the hearth, darning hose.*

RACHEL. You've done it !

LUCY. Done it ?

RACHEL. Sure enough.

LUCY. And so

It's I that's done it—I'm to bear the blame ?
I'm to sit mumchance while my servant girl's
Flaunting her shame to all the countryside,
And everybody guessing. . . .

RACHEL. Little call
To waste much wit in guessing.

LUCY. Nay, God knows,
My husband's name's in all the neighbours' mouths
Coupled with thon bold-eyed loose-petticoat.

RACHEL. Neighbours, say you ? Buck-rabbits and jack-hares
Real scandalised at such-like goings-on—
And, hark, a cockgrouse clucks such spicy tattle
Would make a black ram blush !

LUCY. Ay, sure enough,
A gey lone outby God-forsaken neuk,
Windwhistle ; and I sorely rue the day
Ever I clapt eyes on it.

RACHEL. Yet last week
You seemed to find Windwhistle lively enough
And over-thronged and all, and couldn't rest
Till you'd cleared out the one too many.

LUCY. Rest
Under the same roof with thon hussies ? Nay !
I've tholed a deal, but even a worm will turn.

RACHEL. To be retrodden on ?

LUCY. Ay, you can fleer
And make a mock of me, you and your son !
You'll drive me daft betwixt you. What could I do
But send the baggage packing ? Could I guess
The other wench would side with her and go ?
Good riddance to a pair of sluts, say I.

RACHEL. And welcome to new wenches ? Ay, you've done it.

LUCY. Done it ?

RACHEL. Thon same sluts knew their work, they did :
And we can't run the farm, wanting two hands.

LUCY. Well, hasn't Angus gone to seek new hands ?
They're none so hard to come by ; there's no lack
Of lasses at May hirings.

RACHEL. Sang the brandling—
“ The frying-pan's too hot, I'll try the fire ! ”
Sluts for sluts' work, say I ; and anyway
You'd learnt the worse of them—that sort can't hold
A man like Angus. He'll not fling himself
From Lovers' Leap with such ; though I could fancy
A woman might get such a hold of him
He'd dash himself to death for her sake—ay,
Would leap headlong with her and never blench,
If 'twere the only way. He's got the spirit—
Just such another as the lad who leapt
In the old story ; but the lass I doubt
Is far to seek who'd take the plunge with him—
And yet you never know, you never know ;
He may lie broken at the crag-foot yet ;
He's just the headstrong breed that . . .

LUCY.

Mercy me !

What keeps you raveling about Lovers' Leap ?

RACHEL. I've always had a liking for those lovers :

They took their road—left talk to other folk.

It's only deeds that count—that's why, although

I loathe the things men do, I envy them

The doing. Men can act while women nag

Or eat their hearts out, brooding—though there once

Were women folk who scorned to sit and sulk :

But the days of Jaels and Jezebels are done.

LUCY. And why should Angus jump from Lovers' Leap ?

RACHEL. If Angus loved, he'd be a breakneck lover ;

But it wouldn't be for your sake, or for limmers

Like them you've sacked, and happen will live to rue

The sacking of.

LUCY. So I'm to sit down under . . .

RACHEL. Much sitting down at Windwhistle for you

Or any one, if you can't keep a wench !

LUCY. They aren't all baggages—and, whether or no,
I only did my duty.

RACHEL. That you did—

And much good may it do you. Turning out

The black sheep, happen you'll let in the wolf.

De'il kens who Angus will fetch home with him.

You're right — where there's an Earnshaw there's no lack

Of lasses : and you've given your man the job

He's born and bred to. Well, you'll soon learn now

The tale of your new troubles ; they'll be on you

Before the hour's out. Angus won't pick up

A brace of worn-out besoms, naught but shank

And frowsy wisps, I'll warrant. He's no use

For female scarecrows at Windwhistle, bless him !

He's a true Earnshaw with a lively eye

For sonsy limmers ; and I mind his father

Had a lucky knack of hiring orphans.

LUCY.

Orphans ?

You mean he . . .

RACHEL.

Ay, no trouble with relations :

He was far-seeing, Jake was.

LUCY.

And you let him—

You didn't care ?

RACHEL. Care—care ! I could have killed him
The first time—ay, and every time !

LUCY. And yet . . .

RACHEL. I didn't : I'd not pluck enough ; I'm weak—
Naught but a stickit and half-hearted Judith.
Happen I'd been the sort with spunk to knife him,
There'd have been no call to do it after all.

LUCY. And I'm to stand the like, without a word ?

RACHEL. If you've the sense. I never once let on
I cared a straw—I'd gumption enough to ken
You can't hold any man by whimpering.
A slack tongue never tightened any knot,
Though sharp words have cut many.

LUCY. So I'm to let
My husband loose to live in wickedness,
And never check . . .

RACHEL. You fancy you could check him,
A doll like you ! You little ken your husband.
One woman seldom seems to serve a man—
A bitter truth : but wives must eat sour grass,
And chew the cud of it through all their days.
Boys will be boys, they say, and men are men :
When a man's grown you cannot make him over—
That's all a wife need know.

LUCY. There's men and men.
My father never . . .

RACHEL. Not that you heard tell on.

LUCY. Nor any one else.

RACHEL. Your mother had rare luck.

LUCY. You've dwelt so long cooped up at Windwhistle,
You've come to think all men are midden-cocks
To lord it as they like among tame clockers.
You're much mistaken if you judge all men . . .

RACHEL. Have it your way. I'd take it men are men
And women women the world over. Still,
Leastways you cannot doubt I ken the Earnshaws ;
And it's an Earnshaw you've to reckon with.

LUCY. No Earnshaw shall play fast and loose with me.

RACHEL. How'll you prevent . . .

LUCY. Give him a piece of my mind.

RACHEL. He's had a piece already. I'd be doubting
You'd a deal left to spare.

LUCY. I'll let him know !

RACHEL. A waste of precious knowledge : muckle good
School-teachering him—pearls before swine . . .

LUCY. What's that ?

RACHEL. You're not a scholar—you'd not understand.

LUCY. He'll understand before I've done with him :
He hasn't heard the last.

RACHEL. He'll hear the last
Before you've vented your spite ; and 'twill be he
Will settle when he's had enough, I reckon—
Or I don't know the strain.

LUCY. You never fancy . . .

RACHEL. Never—I only know. I've learnt my lesson.
It takes a braw louse to browbeat a lion.
In this world, Lucy, you've to . . .

LUCY. What a world !

RACHEL. The world's as the Lord made it—He'd His reasons
Doubtless : and, whether or no, 'twould puzzle you
To make a better in six days, my lady :
And certain-sure the Lord won't make it over
Every five minutes just to suit our notions.
A rare world it would be if every jenny
Had her own string and could pull ! Lump it, or like it,
It's all we'll get this side the coffin-lid—
Yet what a tug I'd give if I'd the chance !
I'd turn things topsy-turvy, if I'd got
To frizzle in the devil's frying-pan
For ever after. I'd serve some folk out.
But I was speiring what you mean to do ?

LUCY. To do ?

RACHEL. Ay, do : the braw Windwhistle cocks
Have never yet been cowed by clockers' cackle.

LUCY. Do ? There's not much that I can do, God help me !

RACHEL. Nay, I was duberous you'd the spunk for doing :
You're not the breed.

LUCY. You only said just now,
We can't change aught.

RACHEL. But we'd be wattikins
Never to try.

LUCY. What can I do ?

RACHEL. Naught, naught :
You're not the mettlesome stuff that might be doing.

You'd be no match for Angus : for all your clash,
 You're a weak brashy body. Devil kens
 I've little room for talk, though I, at your age,
 Was twice the woman you'll ever be, I'd not
 A chance with Jake. 'Twill take you all your time
 To do as much as I did.

LUCY. And what's that ?

RACHEL. To hold your tongue.

LUCY. I'll never let my husband . . .

RACHEL. You'd pit yourself against an Earnshaw—you !
 A pretty puling poppet ? Ay, you're pretty—
 That's why he married you ; you took his fancy :
 But if your airs and graces cannot hold him
 Flyting won't bring him to heel. 'Twas rosy cheeks,
 No randy's red face—dimples, and not crows' feet
 That caught the callant. A smile the wrong way up
 Is a smile no longer : so you'd better trim
 The corners of your mouth, and if your prattle
 No longer pleases, keep your saucy tongue
 Safe out of mischief behind your girning teeth.
 Then you—but you were never mate for Angus.

LUCY. Yet he's my husband.

RACHEL. Ay, but not your man.

I've yet to see the wench should wed an Earnshaw—
 Though I for my part had the wit to ken
 I wasn't Jake's marrow, and let him gan his gait :
 So it was me he turned to at the last.
 Yet, who knows, if he'd only had the luck
 To marry his proper mate, the wife to hold him,
 She might have made a husband even of Jake.
 You cannot dam a burn in spate with straw,
 Or stoke a furnace with fluff, or curb a stallion
 With cobweb—and I couldn't satisfy
 Jake's hunger ; so he spent himself in seeking
 A satisfaction that he never found
 In this world, leastways—happen hell might hold . . .

LUCY. You seem to glory in his wickedness.
 You talk like that, though only now you said . . .

RACHEL. I could have killed him—and it's true enough.
 A hundred times I'd straked him in my heart
 And gloated over that body, cold at last,
 Before the red bull gored him—ay, it took

A bull, Windwhistle Champion, to finish Jake :
No mankeen heifer could face him : and he died
With life a red-hot fury in his reins.
Then I was sorry.

LUCY. Sorry he should perish
In all the pride of wickedness ?

RACHEL. Nay, sorry
Jacob should perish in the pride of life
With such a lust of living on him.

LUCY. Yet
You could have killed . . .

RACHEL. If I'd not understood him.
It's understanding gars you hold your hand
Even when the fingers twitch to grip the knife-haft.

LUCY. God ! a nice family I've married into—
A house of devils !

RACHEL. Smell the reek of singeing ?
Happen it's only your iron. Ay, poor doll,
There's blood, not sawdust, in the Earnshaws' veins ;
And Angus—though his story may end different :
He's young, and still has time to meet his marrow
At some chance cross-roads, in the market-place ;
Or she may walk in here at any moment.

LUCY. Not while I live.

RACHEL. So you've a mind to pitch
Yourself headlong from Lovers' Leap ? Not you !
And anyway you'd need to leap alone.

LUCY. She shall not cross . . .

RACHEL. Ay, you've the bragging tongue :
Best bridle it, my lady, if you'd live long,
And take your luck like other wives, unless
You're itching to be Vashti.

LUCY. And who's she ?

RACHEL. You don't know ? Nay, you wouldn't. She was a
queen.

If you'd been different . . .

LUCY. Different ?

RACHEL. Ay, you might . . .

LUCY. I might ?

RACHEL. Ay, if it wasn't for the " if ".
It's always ifs that gravel us in this life,
Unless we're lucky Earnshaws and born blind

To ifs and ans, and so can course clean through them.
 You're you till Doomsday, and can't help yourself,
 Worse luck—though whether worse for you or Angus . . .

LUCY. What is it you'd have me do ?

RACHEL. Since you're yourself,
 Nothing but keep your tongue between your teeth
 Whatever happens, though you should bite the tip off.
 Sore tongues will heal.

LUCY. I'll have no mistress here.

RACHEL. Nor master either ? Well, what comes will come.
 Folk must have fires, and who can check the wind
 That whisks the flighty spark into the wheat-stack ?
 But little need to worrit yet maybe :
 It's only an off-chance Angus finds his fate
 This journey—I may never live to see
 An Earnshaw mated, though I'd give ten years
 To watch the clash ; and anyhow you'll learn
 Your luck before you're many minutes older.
 Angus and Alec should be back by this
 With the old pig-cart creaking with new wenches.
 You should have wedded Alec—he's no Earnshaw ;
 He's easy-going, neither kens nor cares
 If he's between the shafts or on the box—
 A husband born : no Lovers' Leap for him,
 No crashing over crag-tops to destruction—
 And all for love ! If folk would wed their mates
 'Twould be a different and a duller world.

LUCY. Why did I ever marry ?

RACHEL. Ask another !
 That question never found an answer yet
 For any woman who'd the need to ask it.

LUCY. But why should men be . . .

RACHEL. Just because they're men,
 And so can't help themselves.

LUCY. And women must . . .

RACHEL. Remember they are women, and that few
 Have zest enough to satisfy the hunger
 Of life that burns the body of a man.

LUCY. Ay, you're my husband's mother sure enough :
 But I'll not listen to your wicked talk.

RACHEL. Crinkling your dainty nose to sniff the brimstone ?
 Well, we're all sinners in a world of sin :

Yet wicked tongues whiles have the trick of truth.
 If only a body's wicked enough, no call
 For tarradiddles ; he can speak his mind.
 It's only half-and-halfers need to lie.

LUCY. The truth !

RACHEL. You doubt it ? Is't not bitter enough ?
 But you've not learnt to savour truth by its tang :
 I'm duberous you'll ever relish it.

LUCY. Would any decent woman like to hear . . .

RACHEL. Like ? I said naught of liking. Folk can relish
 A flavour they've no liking for, and wives
 Must needs soon lose the taste for lollipops.

LUCY. It beats me, what you're driving at at all—
 First, I must do, next, I must be a dummy,
 And let my husband and his mistresses
 Trample me in the clarts without a murmur.
 You talk for talking's sake.

RACHEL. Whatever else
 Would any woman of sense be talking for ?
 The shrewdest tongue can't turn dolls into devils—
 Nay, nor, poor poppet, men to marionettes.
 So my last word to you is—Hold your whisht,
 Whatever happens this side of the grave.
 You'll never rue a silence, nor want to cut
 Your tongue out for not speaking.

LUCY. Sound advice
 From one whose tongue is ever on the buzz,
 Biting and stinging with its bitter jibes !

RACHEL. My tongue can wag now I'm a looker-on,
 Because it's had the wit to bide its time.
 Once it was muter than a mowdywarp's.

LUCY. I'm to believe that ?

RACHEL. As you like.

LUCY. Your tongue !

RACHEL. Ay, it kept dumb, though many's the time I've bitten
 My lips until I tasted the salt blood
 To keep my tongue from lashing out. And you . . .

LUCY. Well, anyway I sacked the wenches.

RACHEL. Ay,
 But can you keep it up ? You've flicked the flies off,
 For other flies to settle. When I speak
 Of doing, I mean doing once and for all.

LUCY. I'd liefer die than let . . .

RACHEL.

Hark !

LUCY.

What do you hear ?

RACHEL. Old Bessie clattering through the ford : they're coming,

Angus and Alec, and who else, de'il kens !

LUCY. Who else ? Two servant girls my husband's hired
To hoe and weed, pick stones and muck the byre ;
And they'll soon learn who's mistress.

RACHEL (*rising and throwing open the yard door*). True for you :
We'll all soon learn who's mistress sure enough.

(Heard without—a grind of wheels and clatter of hoofs ; the swinging-back of a gate ; the noise of a cart rumbling into the yard and pulling up ; the clashing-to of the gate ; a sound of voices ; the jingling and stamping of a horse being unyoked ; then the tread of steps approaching the door. ESTHER and ADAH BURN, the new farm servants, enter, carrying a small corded wooden trunk which they set down on the threshold. ESTHER BURN is a strapping girl of twenty with still dark eyes. RACHEL and LUCY EARNSHAW stare at her fascinated, without a word, while she stands quietly looking straight in front of her as though she did not see them. ADAH BURN is a slight, pretty girl of seventeen with restless eyes and a petulant mouth.)

ADAH (*tossing her head*). Well, when you've taken stock of us, perhaps

You'll show us to our beds. We've had our tea—
Thank you for asking ! And I'm too dead sleepy
To try a staring-match with any one :
And thon old pig-cart's joggled my poor bones
Till I'm all aches. I've not been used to pig-carts.

RACHEL. Nor aught but shanks's mare, and that ill-shod.
There'll be no pig-cart when you quit—best order
Your ladyship's brougham to call for you, or learn
To keep a civil tongue, wench.

ADAH. . . . Civil tongues
Seem easily kept in this dumb house.

ESTHER.

Whisht, Adah.

RACHEL (*lighting a candle and going towards the door leading into the passage*).

I'll show you to your attic. Fetch your kist ;

And mind don't dunt the walls or bash the stair-treads :
They're weak already with bumping up and down
Of wenches' boxes every hiring-day.

ADAH. Come, Esther, don't stand gaping like an owl :
No call for you to be struck staring-silly,
Though it seems we've happened on a hoolet's nest.
If you can't speak up for yourself, at least catch hold
Your end of the box, and let's away to bed.

ESTHER. Whisht, Ada, whisht !

ADAH. Nay, I'll say what I like.
I'll not be hushed by you or any one :
I'm not a bairn now.

ESTHER. Nay—would God you were !

ADAH. *Hush-a-bye baby on the tree-top ?* Ay,
'Twould suit somebody's games to keep me a bairn,
To hustle out of sight whenever a man
Keeks round the doorcheek, eh ? Oh, but you're sly !
You think I'm simple, but I ken as much
Of men . . .

ESTHER. Pray God, you never ken as much !

RACHEL (*muttering*). *When the wind ceases, the cradle will fall.*

ADAH (*to ESTHER*). You keep
Your breath to cool your porridge, and your prayers
For them that ask you for them, lass.

RACHEL. *And down tumbles baby and cradle and all.*
But come along :

I can't stand here while you two choose to squabble—
Wasting the candle. Are you coming or no ?

(*The two girls lift the box, follow RACHEL EARNSHAW out
of the kitchen, and are soon heard climbing the stairs.
When RACHEL returns, LUCY is still standing, gazing
after her abstractedly.*)

RACHEL. You're a fine mistress !

LUCY. Thon's the saucy jade
I've got to knuckle down to—thon's the sort
Takes a man's fancy !—ordering me about
In my own house ! But picking stones will break
Her pride, if I've my way with her.

RACHEL. Your way ?

LUCY. She'll learn to bite her lips.

RACHEL. You've naught to fear
From chatterbox—she's not the dangerous one.

'Twas quiet eyes and Sunday afternoons
I learnt to dread.

LUCY. Dangerous? You mean . . .

(ANGUS EARNSHAW *enters, followed by* ALEC.)

ANGUS. Who's dangerous?

Let them come on—I'll be a match for them.
I'd sell my soul to meet a dangerous devil :
I'm fair fed-up with petticoats and mugs.
Talking of mugs, I've got some news for mother :
Your youngest's fallen over-head-and-ears
In love already with the pouting wench.

ALEC. You hold your tongue, or . . .

ANGUS. See his pretty blushes !
O fond first love ! The time has been when glances
From saucy eyes would set my ear-tips tingling—
Eh, Lucy, lass ?

LUCY. You don't get over me
With fleecing. I'll be mistress of Windwhistle . . .

ANGUS. Still in the tantrums ? You're a termagant—
But, dangerous?—just about as dangerous
As any other frightened hen. Shoo ! Shoo !
Where are the lasses—packed them off already ?
Well, they'd be tired.

RACHEL. What do they call the wenches ?

ANGUS. Burn.

RACHEL. Sisters ?

ANGUS. Ay.

RACHEL. Unlike enough to be so.

ANGUS. Young Alec's flame is Adah, and the other . . .

(*Pauses.*)

RACHEL. Well, well, and so you cannot mind her name ?
Perhaps Alec . . .

ALEC. Ay, it's Esther.

RACHEL. And the virgin
Found favour in the king's sight.

LUCY. What's that you're mumbling ?

RACHEL. You wouldn't understand : it's Bible talk.

LUCY. This wicked house !

RACHEL. That you're the mistress of ?

ANGUS. Ay, ay, there's mistresses and mistresses.
But dangerous, you said ? I've never met

A dangerous woman yet. I'd like to tame . . .
I'd swap Windwhistle for a spice of danger.

RACHEL. You're lucky if you lose no more than that.

SCENE II

SCENE.—*The same, about six o'clock the next evening : RACHEL and LUCY EARNSHAW setting the table for tea.*

RACHEL (*going towards the window and looking out*).

Time they were knocking off for tea—gey rough
On them to set them picking stones the first day.

LUCY. I don't see why : they're paid for picking stones.

RACHEL. You've never done it ?

LUCY. Not I ! I've never been

A servant : but the likes of them are used
To field-work.

RACHEL. Ay, they're used to breaking their backs
To earn their own and other people's bread.

LUCY. Well, some one's got to do it. I don't see . . .

RACHEL. You don't—and yet you talk. If you'd picked
stones

From six to six, as I've done in my time,
Happen 'twould open your eyes and shut your mouth.

LUCY. My father'd have thought shame to set me to it.

RACHEL. And rightly : it's no job for any girl :
And thon lass, Adah, doesn't look over strong.

LUCY. Tut, tut—'twill do the brazen bildert good
To bend her back a little ; and anyway
Limmers the like of her are born and bred
To such-like jobs ; they've always had to do it,
And so don't feel . . .

RACHEL. Not being flesh and blood ?

LUCY. Well, beggars can't be choosers.

RACHEL. If they could

Some of us would change places. But there's naught
Of the beggar about the Burns—they've got some spirit,
Thon lasses ; and, for all her quiet ways,
Esther's the prouder of the two, I take it.
Though I'm none easy daunted, I shouldn't care
To cross her will or touch the quick of her pride.

LUCY. Byre-muckers' pride !

RACHEL. Pride doesn't always sit
With folded hands in the parlour.

LUCY. Well, it seems
Angus is none too tender of their pride :
He kens the way to take with such : I trust
He'll keep them at it till they sweat the starch out.

RACHEL. Angus is like his father, hard on women :
He uses them ; they're naught but bones and thews
To hoe, pick stones, and muck the byre for him ;
And only flesh and blood to serve his pleasure.

LUCY. Well, thank the Lord, he doesn't seem too soft. . . .

RACHEL. Such men are never soft with women folk,
As you and I ken to our cost—their love's
A spark struck out of iron, and, while it chars
The windlestraw, it leaves the coulter unscathed
To plough fresh stubble.

LUCY. Well, you will be talking ;
And doubtless you mean something, if I'd list
For guessing riddles. But it's time I went
To tidy my hair.

(Goes out of the door leading into the passage.)

RACHEL. It isn't tongues that set
The hardest riddles. I've guessed Adah's secret,
For all her chatter, but Esther puzzles me.
She sat mumchance at breakfast, and scarcely glanced
At Angus when he spoke to her. Few women
Can keep their eyes off him. She must be stone—
And yet there's fire in flint. Well, here she comes.
I'll see if I can strike a spark from her.

(ESTHER BURN enters quietly from the yard in her working clothes.)

You've had a long day of it.

ESTHER. Long enough.

RACHEL. A gey rough place for lasses, Windwhistle :
The master's a hard master.

ESTHER. Ay, he's hard ;
But I've been used to work.

RACHEL. Still it was rough,
Setting you picking stones the first day.

ESTHER. Ay,
But masters should be hard.

RACHEL. Well, anyway at Windwhistle, I'd hazard,
Your sister's safe enough—a decent lad

Is Alec : and she's not the sort to take
The fancy of a man like . . . But I'm hawering.

ESTHER. You mean that . . .

RACHEL. I mean nothing : I'm just clashing
For clashing's sake like an ill-sneckit gate :
And you're no " whistle-and-I'll-come-to-thee-my-lad ".

ESTHER. I've no fear for myself ; but if harm come
To Adah there'll be bloodshed.

RACHEL. Bloodshed, woman !
You're crazy surely.

ESTHER. Ay, I'm wellnigh crazed—
Nigh driven desperate since my mother died,
Chivvied from place to place. Why can't folk let
Two decent lasses earn their bread in peace ?
Why must men always pester . . .

RACHEL. Mercy me !
But I've struck out the sparks, and no mistake.
So that's the secret of the brooding eyes
And tight-shut lips ? Lass, I was only trying
To see if I could kindle you ; and it seems
I'm like to burn my fingers for my pains.
I always was a one for playing with fire :
Happen I'll burn the house about my ears
Before I'm through. But I was only gabbing :
You mustn't listen to my clatterjaw.
I only . . .

(ADAH BURN *enters from the yard and sinks wearily into a chair.*)

(To ADAH) So you're back ?

ADAH. And trashed to death.

RACHEL. You've had a long day.

ADAH. Ay, and some folk seem
To fancy women are horses. I'm fair done :
But I'll not work another day like this.
And Esther there, she couldn't wait for me,
Though well enough she knew I was so dithered
I scarce could put one foot before the other.

RACHEL. The master's hard.

ADAH. Ay, but he'll meet his match.

RACHEL. You fancy you . . .
You'll be the first that's ever been a match
For Angus ; but if you've a gosling's gumption

You'll take things cannily, and not forget
Which side your bread is buttered on.

ADAH. I've to meet
The man would scare me. I ken far too much
Of men, I do.

* RACHEL. You've never met an Earnshaw.

ADAH. Still, even Earnshaws are just men, I take it :
And—well, I fancy I can manage men.

RACHEL. You're talking like a fool. And, whether or no,
The tea's just ready. There's water in the scullery
For you to clean yourselves : I filled the basin,
And you'll find soap and towels. So go your ways.

*(ADAH rises and she and ESTHER go into the scullery
together, when a sound of splashing is heard. Presently
LUCY EARNSHAW enters from the passage.)*

LUCY. They're back ?

RACHEL *(taking the teapot from the hob)*.

The wenches are—and fair trashed out.

Angus is hard.

(ANGUS EARNSHAW enters, followed by ALEC.)

ANGUS. Hard !—and who says I'm hard ?
Not you, Lucy, I warrant : you always swear
I'm over-easy with wenches. Any limmer
Can twist me round her finger—that's the song
You're singing me to sleep with every night.

(ESTHER and ADAH BURN enter from the scullery.)

Here's Adah now—she doesn't say I'm hard ?
She's had an easy day.

ADAH. An easy day !
I'll never work another day like that.

ANGUS. True, true—for I've been gently breaking you in :
I don't drive fillies over-hard at first.
You'll learn what working means before the week's out.
But Esther's broken already : she doesn't waste
Her wind : her withers are unrung. I reckon
She's ready for another day's work now.

RACHEL. She keeps her counsel like Dick Dobson's nag
Does Esther. When the galled jade doesn't wince,
Best drive her cannily and watch her eye.

ADAH. She's got no spirit : but he won't drive me.

ANGUS. I won't ?

RACHEL. A burnt bairn dreads the fire, but a burnt woman,
It seems, will only shove her fist in farther.
Well, little use my talking. If you're bent
On makin' a cinder of yourself, you've got to.
I can't prevent . . .

LUCY. I've got to do my duty.

RACHEL. Your duty—ay, we all must do our duty.
They taught us that at school—"England expects . . ."
How does it run? And then he clapt his spyglass
To his blind peeper? But you've two good eyes,
And so can see your duty plain before you :
It takes me all my time—with spectacles ;
And I've mislaid *them* now.

LUCY. They're in the parlour.

RACHEL. Well, I'm just going there now to read my Bible.

LUCY. Your Bible—you ! I wonder you've the face !

RACHEL. 'Deed I'm none easy daunted : but little harm
In Bible-reading, surely ? I look forward
The whole week long to Sunday afternoons,
And mastering a chapter. Well worth while
Cracking thon breakjaw names to get the kernel—
It always has a bite ; and if you studied
The good book oftener you'd ken more of husbands—
A deal of human nature in the Bible :
And, what with always dwelling among sheep
And studying the Old Testament, I've learnt
No little about men folk in my time—
Though it's not every ram's a Solomon.
Well, I'll away and leave you to your duty ;
And thank my stars I got mine over young,
And so can take things easy in my old age.

(RACHEL EARNSHAW *doffs her apron and goes out by the passage door.* LUCY EARNSHAW, *who has not been listening to her last words, sits down and gazes into the fire with an abstracted air. Presently a door closes above : steps are heard on the stairs, and ESTHER BURN, dressed for going out in her Sunday clothes, enters from the passage and is crossing to the yard door when LUCY EARNSHAW looks up and speaks.*)

LUCY. Where are you bound for now ?

I hardly ken :

ESTHER (*stopping*).

I was just thinking I would take a turn.

LUCY. Ay, servant lasses can go gallivanting,
While mistresses must slave.

ESTHER. I've done my work.

LUCY. Happen! And so you're walking out alone?
And where's your sister?

ESTHER. She's not finished dressing.

LUCY. And you can't wait till she's done titivating?
Dressing! And you pranked like a popinjay
While I'm still in my coarse apron. Some folk might
Make bold to ask where the likes of you can find
The money for such fakish flerds—not I!
I wasn't born yesterday, though I am a wife—
Only an honest wife; and I'm none curious.

ESTHER. I've worked to pay for every stitch I've on.

LUCY. Worked? Happen! Don't you dare to look at me
Like that. I'm mistress here, and won't let servants—
Let alone a barefaced . . .

*(Hesitates, daunted by the look in ESTHER'S eyes, but begins
to speak again as ESTHER turns to go on her way.)*

Not so fast, my lass:

I want to have a word with you.

ESTHER. The word

You couldn't find just now?

LUCY. Nay, I just want . . .

I was forgetting . . .

ESTHER. 'Twas no Sunday word?

LUCY. I want to talk to you for your own good.

ESTHER. My good?

LUCY. Ay, but the thing I've got to say's
Not easily said by any decent wife:

But—you ken why I sacked the other wenches?

(ESTHER regards her steadily in silence.)

Why don't you answer when I speak to you?

I'm mistress still, and I'll not be defied

In my own house by any . . .

ESTHER. You're mistress still . . .

LUCY. What do you mean by "still", you . . .

ESTHER. Your own word.

You're mistress still; so I must answer you.

Since I came here I've heard some shameful gossip.

LUCY. You've heard. . . . Then let it be a warning to you.

(ESTHER says nothing, but regards LUCY steadily.)

You dare to look . . . Why don't you answer me ?

It's no good shamming deaf and dumb : you can't . . .

ESTHER. What's there to say ?

LUCY. You heard then ? It went home ?

ESTHER. And so it's true, the gossip ? I'd have thought
You'd be the last to mention . . .

LUCY. You'd have thought !

So I'm to be taught manners by my servant ?

Servant ! God knows, they're none of them my servants—

Rachel is right : they're all my husband's . . .

ESTHER. Woman !

LUCY. You call me " woman " ? I'll teach you who it is
You're calling " woman ". I'm your mistress still.

ESTHER. My mistress should rather die than . . .

LUCY. Happen you're right :

But I, what can I do when my own man . . .

ESTHER. I'm sorry . . .

LUCY. Sorry ? Now you're mocking me.

ESTHER. Mocking you ? Nay !

LUCY. Then I'll not have your pity.

My stars, to think I married to be pitied

By a loose-petticoat ! Of all the brass !

You think you can afford to pity me ?

Of all the bold-faced trollops ! I ken your sort ;

You don't take me in with mum sneaky ways

And staring like a silly. I've got your measure ;

And I can tell you one thing, my fine lady—

Your day will be a short one here ; and when

You're gone I'll still be mistress of Windwhistle :

And so you cannot say I haven't warned you.

(ESTHER stands steadily regarding LUCY.)

What are you waiting for ?

ESTHER. You've done ?

LUCY. I've done.

And now I may have time to go and dress,

Though I can't rig myself in such fine feathers

As my own servants. I'd think shame to wear . . .

(She breaks off, daunted by ESTHER'S eyes, takes off her
apron, makes a show of folding it with deliberation, and
puts it in a drawer of the dresser, then goes out by the
passage door. ESTHER stands for a moment, as though
dazed, looking after her ; then turns slowly towards the

yard door, but stops, startled, as she sees ANGUS EARN-SHAW standing in the doorway watching her. He steps in and crosses to the hearth, taking some strands of whip-cord out of his pocket. ESTHER goes on her way, but as she reaches the door ANGUS calls to her softly.)

ANGUS. Esther !

(ESTHER stops, but without turning or speaking.)

I want you. Where are you away to ?

To Lovers' Leap ? Ay, thon's the place to sit

On a fine afternoon—but not alone.

Just bide a moment, lass : I want you here.

I've got to make a whip-lash, and need some one

To keep a hold of the cord-ends while I plait—

Some one who'll not let go. You've got a grip.

I mind you hanging on when that nowt, Alec,

Tripped, and let go the lead as he was taking

The red bull—or the red bull taking him . . .

(ESTHER turns and comes slowly towards ANGUS, holding out her hand for the cords, which he gives her.)

What fingers for a wench ! I shouldn't care

To feel them at my thrapple or have a welt

Across the jaw from such a neave as that.

But you're no scarting spitfire, letting fly

When a man least expects it. You've no need :

You've got too good a grip, and can afford

To bide your time, as I'm learning to my cost.

But that will keep until . . . This won't take long ;

And then we'll go together. I've a word

I want to say to you with no one by—

Not that I mind eavesdroppers : I'm the master

In my own house, and brook no interference :

But it's as well . . .

ESTHER. Say all you've got to say

Now. When I walk, I walk alone.

ANGUS. You do ?

By God, that's so ! I never kenned a lass

Can her own gait so quietly : it's that—

Just that has done for me.

ESTHER. Done ?

ANGUS. \ Oh, you ken—

You must, when I . . . But it will keep till we're

Perched snug together . . .

ESTHER. Say all you've got to say
Here. I'll not hearken to a single word
You can't speak openly.

ANGUS. So you defy me ?
Then I'll say all right out.

ESTHER. Best hold your peace
Now . . .

ANGUS. So you've changed your mind ?

ESTHER. Now and for ever.

ANGUS. You threaten me ? God's truth, I've never let
A woman talk to me like that, and I'll . . .
You're the first wench that's ever wanted to—
Leastways no other's dared. But you've defied me
To speak out now ; and I'll not 'bate a word—
Though why should there be need of words between us ?
I'm used to my way ; and devil all I care
Who hears what I've to say—they may as tite
Learn now as later. 'Twill be little news
To them that ken me. Nay, they'll only judge
It's the old story—they'll not understand
The difference : it will taste the same to them,
Turning it on their tongues. You're just a wench
Like any other to them : their piddling minds
Can't take your measure—or mine. I've never been
A secret man : I've taken my own track,
But always tramped it openly—never cared
A tinker's curse for all their tittle-tattle :
So likely you'll have heard . . .

ESTHER. Ay ! to your shame . . .

ANGUS. Shame—what should Angus Earnshaw have to do
With shame ? Shame's only for poor windlestraws
In trousers, secret lechers. I've never been
A hole-in-the-corner lover. I've some pride :
I take my own road ; and I'll step it out,
Shameless, to hell, if that be where it lead to.
I've never cared . . .

ESTHER. For all you've trampled on ?
The women's lives destroyed ?

ANGUS. Straws in the burning !
What recks the fire of flimsy wisps of twitch-grass
When it's hungry for real fuel ? And now I've found—
I've found my mate. I'm sick of petticoats :

I want a woman—and at last I've got her.
 Shame—what have such as we to do with shame !
 Oh, you must ken, for all your quiet ways
 And those still eyes ! You've wellnigh driven me mad—
 Looking right through me without looking at me,
 And never speaking, never letting on
 You knew I lived in the same world with you.
 But you're none cold—you've fire to match my fire,
 Though yours burns steadier. Esther, woman . . .

ESTHER. You dare
 To touch me !

ANGUS. You ! To talk like any fizgig
 That waits for kisses in among the stacks !
 You're not that sort : I've had my fill of them.
 Nay ! Don't mistake me, Esther. You're not the first,
 But you're the last, so help . . . But where's the need
 Of oaths ? You know—you know . . . Oh, you must feel . . .
 Whom God hath joined . . .

ESTHER. You dare !

ANGUS. Dare ? And why not ?
 It's true this time—although it was a lie
 On the parson's lips when I was tied to Lucy.
 Dare, Esther—I'd dare hell and all for you . . .
 And you'll be mistress of Windwhistle—ay !
 I'm master in my own house, and you'll be mistress.
 Thon doll . . .

ESTHER. I'm through with Windwhistle.

ANGUS. You're through ?

ESTHER. I leave to-morrow morning.

ANGUS. That's the spirit
 Rouses my blood. Oh, you can madden me !
 Meet me to-night at Lovers' Leap.

ESTHER. I'd best
 Be packing up my traps.

ANGUS. You mean you'll go !

ESTHER. I and my sister leave to-morrow morning.

ANGUS. You leave—you leave ? By God, you shall not
 go !

I've hired you, wench, and I'm your master still.

ESTHER. My master !

ANGUS. Ay, you'll learn it to your cost.

ESTHER. Haven't I paid the price already ?

ANGUS.

Well,

As you will have it so, so let it be.

I'll tame you yet. You'd better change your gown.

ESTHER. My gown?

ANGUS.

If you'd not clarty it : 'twould be

Wasteful to draggle such fine feathers. Come!

Don't stand there staring : I don't pay you wages

For gaping like a stoorded ewe. I want

The byre mucked out.

ESTHER.

That's not my job.

ANGUS.

Your job's

To do my bidding while you're still my servant :

And you're my servant bound ; you cannot quit

Without a quarter's notice, you know well.

ESTHER. I do no jobs on Sunday afternoon.

ANGUS. Well, I've been offering you a pleasanter job—

A Sunday job and all—but you don't fancy . . .

Though happen now you'd like to change your mind?

ESTHER. I'll muck the byre.

(The passage door opens and ADAH BURN, in outdoor clothes, enters hurriedly, as if late for a tryst, and crosses the kitchen towards the yard door.)

ANGUS.

Well, there is no accounting

For tastes—what say you, Adah? Esther swears

She'd rather stop and muck the byre than take

A stroll.

ADAH *(stopping and turning)*. The byre—on Sunday afternoon?

She's crazy!

(ESTHER goes quietly out by the passage door.)

ANGUS. So I'm thinking : but I've tamed

A madder mare before to-day.

ADAH.

You've tamed?

You've not been bullying her? It's not your orders?

ANGUS. She took her choice.

ADAH.

Well, it gets over me

Why any one should choose . . . But she's pig-headed

When once she gets a notion. We'd to leave

The last place without wages just because . . .

(Breaks off.)

ANGUS. Because?

ADAH. Oh, don't ask me ! I only know
She'd got some maggot in her head, and naught
Would satisfy her but a moonlight flitting.

ANGUS. Ay, ay—and you ?

ADAH. Oh, I'd to do her bidding
For peace' sake : and I cannot say I'm sorry,
As things have turned out, that we made the change.

ANGUS. As things have turned out ? And you'd do her bidding
Like a good bairn again if she . . .

ADAH. No fear !
I gan my own gait from this on.

ANGUS. Ay, ay—
But you're the spirited wench, and no mistake !
You left without your wages then ? You've got . . .

ADAH. Scarce a brass farthing to bless ourselves with till you
Choose to fork out.

ANGUS. Ay, ay—yet she would quit ?
She's got some spirit, she has, the stubborn jade !

ADAH. Still, it gets over me why any one
Should choose to muck the byre. You bullied her.
You should think shame. You'd better not try on
Those games with me. What are you smiling at ?

ANGUS. Just wondering which you'd choose—mucking a byre
Or walking out to Lovers' Leap with me ?

ADAH. With you ? So that's . . . But I can't stand here
chattering.
I'm late already.

ANGUS. Come, which would you choose ?

ADAH. Small need to ask. (*Turns to go.*)

ANGUS. I'll follow in a moment.

ADAH (*stopping*). You'll follow ? Nay, I never said I'd go.

ANGUS. You'd rather muck the byre ?

ADAH. No byres for me
On Sunday ; and you cannot badger Adah,
Though Esther lets you bully her. She's too meek :
But I'd not stand it.

ANGUS. So ?

ADAH. And anyway
I've promised Alec I'll walk out with him.

ANGUS. You'd rather ?

ADAH. Well, we're trysted for to-day ;
And he's been waiting.

ANGUS. Ay, you've kept him dangling,
Kicking his heels, until he's nearly hacked
Thon gate to splinters. That's the way to treat them—
You ken á thing or two.

ADAH (*smiling*). I must be stepping.

(*As she speaks ESTHER, in her working clothes, appears in the passage doorway, and pauses for a moment. ANGUS sees her, but ADAH does not.*)

ANGUS (*to ADAH*). So I'm forsaken ?

ADAH.

Happen, if you behave,

Next Sunday . . .

(*ANGUS starts forward as if to snatch a kiss, but ADAH eludes him.*)

ADAH. Shame ! And you a married man !

(*ADAH runs out, laughing, but ANGUS does not follow.*

ESTHER waits till she is out of hearing, then walks deliberately up to ANGUS where he stands in the middle of the room, looks him straight in the eyes, and speaks slowly and with difficulty.)

ESTHER. I'll meet you at the Lovers' Leap to-night.

ANGUS (*starting*). You mean . . . But why've you changed ?

ESTHER.

I can't afford

To wear my Sunday gown for mucking byres.

ANGUS. But you've no call to do that now. Why, lass,

I only jested.

ESTHER. Only !

ANGUS. You didn't fancy

I meant it, eh ? Well, you ken better now.

Still, if you hadn't . . . but you've learnt your lesson.

ESTHER. I've learnt my lesson.

ANGUS.

Ay, I knew I'd tame you.

ESTHER. And Adah ?

ANGUS.

So that pricked ? What should I want

With thon young flirtigig when I've got you ?

Still, if you hadn't ! She will have no games !

I'd teach her what her pretty tricks were worth ;

And when I'd done with her she'd change her tune—

Her bragging trumpet blown, she'd whimper and whine

Like a broken-winded wheezy concertina,

She would, the doxy—and you'd be to blame.

But Alec's welcome to her, now that you . . .

The moon will be up by ten o'clock to-night.

We'll sit on the crag together and look down
 On the glinting lough below—a dizzy drop,
 If you let go. They say two lovers leapt
 Together in old days, and didn't strike
 The water, as they'd doubtless counted on doing.
 They fell among the boulders at the crag-foot—
 And their two bodies smashed to smithereens !
 But you and I are not the dizzy sort :
 We'll perch there snug together—a risky perch
 For lovers ; and that's why it suits my mettle.

(ESTHER turns from him and walks slowly towards the
 yard door.)

ANGUS. Where are you bound for now ?

ESTHER. To muck the byre.

ANGUS. God ! but I like your spirit : you're my marrow.

(ESTHER goes out without another word. ANGUS gazes
 after her, then, turning, sees his mother standing in the
 passage doorway watching him.)

RACHEL (coming into the kitchen). I've just been reading about
 Sisera :

She was a game one, Jael.

ANGUS. What's that, old raven—
 Croaking of bloody stories ?

(A quick step is heard in the passage and LUCY EARNSHAW
 hurries in, twisting up her hair as she comes.)

LUCY. Well, I never !
 What's Esther after in her working clothes ?
 I was just tidying my hair for tea,
 And saw her, in the glass, crossing the yard.

ANGUS. She's gone to muck the byre.

LUCY. This afternoon ?
 On Sunday ! Well, I never heard the like :
 And only now dressed up to the nines and all
 For gallivanting ! I can't understand
 What's taken her—unless you made her do it ?
 She sauced you, and you bid her ?

ANGUS. Ay, I bid her.

LUCY. Well, I must say I like a man who's master
 Of his own farm. You're that, and no mistake.
 You'll stand no lip from any hind, not you ;

And that's the way to treat the baggages.
 Eh, Rachel, but you don't know everything :
 You've been mistaken—that slut dangerous !

RACHEL. A burnt bairn dreads the fire . . . But, thank the
 Lord,
 I'm nothing but a looker-on these days.

SCENE IV

SCENE.—*An attic at Windwhistle on Sunday night. The wooden trunk stands open in the middle of the room ; and ESTHER BURN, still in working dress, folds her Sunday gown and other garments and packs them into it. Presently a step is heard on the stairs : the door opens and ADAH BURN enters, still in her outdoor clothes.*

ADAH. I'm fairly trashed.

ESTHER. Where ever have you been ?

ADAH. Stravaging over hill and dale with Alec.

ESTHER. You missed your tea.

ADAH. I missed it, and much else

I minded missing a deal more than tea.

ESTHER. What, Adah ?

ADAH. Ah, you'd like to know, you would ?

But that's to come.

ESTHER. To come ?

ADAH. How I'll get through

The week I cannot think ; but anyway

It's something to look forward to. Please God,

I'll waste no more fine Sundays !

ESTHER. What's your meaning ?

ADAH. That would be telling. You're too curious, Esther.

ESTHER. Alec's a decent lad.

ADAH. A decent nowt !

ESTHER. He's fond of you.

ADAH. Ay, ay, he's fond enough :

But others . . . I was never meant to waste . . .

ESTHER. And he'd be faithful.

ADAH. Ay, a safety-match—

Strikes only on the box !

ADAH.

You have ?

But I have not lost mine : I've got no quarrel
With Angus Earnshaw ; he's not bid me quit.

ESTHER. Nor me.

ADAH. Well, I'm fair flummoxed ! First you
say . . .

ESTHER. And last, we're through with Windwhistle to-night.

ADAH. By crikey, no ! I'll not be dragged around
The countryside to please you. Leave again
Without a penny-piece, when I have sweated
Myself fair sick to earn a bit of brass
To buy myself some decent duds with—nay,
Not this time, Esther ! If you're set on flitting
Nothing will turn you, I ken well enough—
You've always been pig-headed ; but you'll go
And leave me here.

ESTHER. I'll never leave you here :
I've always taken care of you : I promised . . .

ADAH. You promised mother ? Ay, I ken : but she
Is in her grave ; and I'm a bairn no longer.
A deal too much you took on yourself—you promised,
Promised for me ! You've always taken care !
You mammied me ; and I was good to cuddle ;
You aye liked dollies, and I was your doll—
Something to wash and dress, and slaver with kisses
And bribe with lollipops to do your bidding.
But I'm a bairn no longer. If it's brats
You're wanting, better wed and bear your own.
I'm a grown woman, and I'll gan my gait
Without your leave . . .

ESTHER. Adah !

ADAH. Ay, Adah, Adah !
You're not the only one that calls her " Adah "—
You're not her mistress now she's got a master.

ESTHER. You poor, poor lass—you little know what you
say !

ADAH. I know. Because he happens to be wed,
You think I should . . . But I ken what I'm after :
I'm no man's slave—I've taught him that already.

ESTHER. Adah, have you forgotten mother's life ?

ADAH. Why should I not forget ? She's in her grave,
While I'm a breathing woman with her own life

ESTHER. Then I must tell you, Addie . . .

ADAH.

Not a word !

Nay, I'll not heed : I've listened all my life :

It's my turn now for talking ; and I ken

'Twould suit somebody well to keep me a bairn.

ESTHER. 'Twould suit . . .

ADAH.

I ken you're jealous of me, Esther.

ESTHER. Jealous !

ADAH.

Ay, Madam Mum, so prim and proper,

I ken your sort. That's why we left the last place.

You thought the master fancied me, and so

We needs must quit. But I've no quarrel with you

For that : I couldn't abide old ginger-whiskers

Myself, though if I'd had a liking for him

I'd have seen you straked before I would have left.

And Angus—ay, I've seen you look at him ?

No woman ever looked in a man's eyes

Like that unless . . . I wasn't born blind, Esther.

Would you have knuckled down this afternoon

At the bidding of any other man than him ?

I didn't catch on then, but now I twig.

I'd do the same myself : and though you're jealous

I cannot blame you—we can't help ourselves :

We're fated, Esther. When I first set eyes

On Angus at the fair I knew my master,

And fidgeted until I caught his eye :

And once he saw us there the trick was done.

He didn't shilly-shally ; he knew his mind.

Blame you ? If I thought you or any one

Stood in my way, I'd stick at nothing, woman :

And I'd not leave here for ten thousand pounds—

Not if you begged me on your bended knees,

And mother's ghost—nay, not if my own fetch

Should stand before me now and give me warning.

If you were lying on your deathbed, Esther,

And begged me now, I couldn't.

ESTHER.

Not if I

Stood with the hangman's rope about my neck ?

ADAH. The hangman's rope ? You're mad ! He said you
were—

Said he'd tamed madder mares than you. You're crazed

With jealousy. I'm sorry. I can't help it.

We cannot help ourselves—we're never asked :
 And I don't know I want to be made different
 Since Angus fancies . . . though it's hard on you.
 But one must suffer always ; and you've had
 Your chance—we started equal, but you let
 Him bully you ; and now he thinks you're just
 Another Lucy. Still, if you'd been the one
 He'd fancied—but it won't bear dwelling on !
 I'd have stopped short of nothing.

ESTHER.

You, my sister,

My only . . .

ADAH. Nay, but we're not sisters now—
 We're just two women with a man betwixt us.
 I'd have stopped short of nothing : so it's well
 Things took the turn they did. Yet I don't wonder
 You're daft with disappointment. I'd go dotty . . .

ESTHER. Oh, if you only knew ! Adah, that man . . .

ADAH (*putting her fingers in her ears*).

Nay, I'll not listen to a word against him !

If you so much as breathe a syllable

'Twill take me all my time to keep my hands

From ramming your spite back down your throat to choke you.

Best get to bed and try to sleep it off :

You're overwrought, working to-day and all

After six days on end at picking stones.

However I'd get through another week

If I hadn't something to look forward to !

I'm just bone-tired with traiking moor and moss

With that fond gowk. Whaups ! I'm fair daft for sleep.

And you'll think better of it by the morning

And not be set on leaving.

ESTHER.

I'll not leave you.

ADAH. That's right. You know, lass, I'd do anything
 I could to humour you—but I couldn't go
 Though it were certain death to bide.

ESTHER.

It's worse

Than death, the price to pay.

ADAH.

Then I will pay it.

What must be, must.

ESTHER.

Ay, what must be, must be.

SCENE V

SCENE.—*Lovers' Leap, the crest of a wave-shaped whinstone crag, sloping steeply on the one side to the height of two hundred feet, and falling in a sheer precipice on the other to a little lough. The slope is covered with coarse bent, but the face of the crag consists of naked pillars of basaltic rock. It is twelve o'clock on Sunday night, and the moon shines brightly in the unclouded heavens. ANGUS EARNSHAW stands on the ridge against the sky, gazing across the fells. Presently ESTHER BURN is seen slowly climbing the slope. As she approaches, ANGUS turns and catches sight of her, but stays where he is until she is within a few feet of him.*

ANGUS. You've come.

ESTHER (*looking at him fixedly*). I've come.

ANGUS. And kept me kicking my heels

Two hours until you chose to? Ten I fixed.

I've not been used to be kept waiting.

ESTHER. Nay?

ANGUS. Why do you look like that? But we'll not quarrel,
Now that you have come. I knew well you'd come.

ESTHER. You knew, and yet . . .

ANGUS. Ay, when you said you would—

Though you ken the fashion to treat a man like me,

To keep me hungry: and I like you better

For taking your own time. You're mettlesome:

You've got my spirit surely, and it's fitting

Kestrel should mate with kestrel.

ESTHER. I took my time—

And yet you waited?

ANGUS. Why, my bird, what else?

I kenned you'd come when you had given your word,

As sure as fate.

ESTHER. As sure as fate.

ANGUS. As sure

As death.

ESTHER. As sure as death.

ANGUS. Ay, once you'd promised.

You're not the flighty sort: you know your mind:

You'll do what you set out to do—go through

With any job you've put your hand to.

ESTHER. Ay.

ANGUS. No turning you when once your heart's in it.

ESTHER. My heart !

ANGUS. Ay, Esther, lass, you'd never have come
If your heart had not been in it. Let's sit down.
A rare night, this.

(ESTHER moves away from him to the edge of the precipice
and looks over.)

ANGUS. Nay, not so nigh the edge !
You might—but you are not the dizzy sort :
So you can stand there, calmly looking down.
That's where the lovers leapt—a devilish drop !
And I could almost take the leap with you—
Though it would be a fearful ending, Esther,
To smash on the boulders.

ESTHER (*moaning*). Oh !

ANGUS. But you and I
Can stand together on the edge of danger,
Clear-headed—mates !

(*He moves towards ESTHER with outstretched arms.*)

ESTHER (*turning sharply*). You dare to touch me—you !

ANGUS. Dare—and why not ? I didn't come here, my lass—
We didn't come here, I reckon, to spend the night
On the crag-top, a pair of standing-stones ?

ESTHER. You came—I came : but only one of us
Will go alive from here.

ANGUS (*startled*). You mean . . . Nay, lass . . .
I'll hold you ; and you shall not jump.

ESTHER. You dare
To lay a hand on me ! Nay, I'll not jump,
And leave you living to work your wicked will
On other women.

ANGUS. So it's I must leap—
And you're the one to go alive from here ?
You've settled it ? I never knew the like :
You've got the nerve. By God ! you make me mad
To have you, and you know it—that's your game.

ESTHER. You've not the courage to die of your own will.

ANGUS. Only the pluck to live. Do you suppose
Any hen-harrier, once he's got his claws in
And settled down to glut himself, lets go,
To try and wring his own neck in a tree-fork ?
To die—when I have never lived till now !

ESTHER. You'll die—and I'm prepared to pay the price.

ANGUS. The price? You'd murder me and hang for it?
You fancy I'd let you? But you're jesting, lass?

ESTHER. God knows which one will murder, which will hang.

ANGUS. So we're to fight it out, the two of us,
Like haggards in mid-air?—for you're no kestrel,
Pouncing on shrews and grubs: it's heronshaws
You fly at, Esther; and I like your spirit.
You're game; but I'll not lay a finger on you.
Look, I'll stand here, and you can send me spinning.

(ANGUS *poises himself on the very edge of the crag with his back to the precipice.*)

You daren't? I thought not. You would do a murder
And pay the price? An easy price for you:
They seldom hang a woman nowadays,
As well you know.

ESTHER. I didn't know. I meant
To pay the price.

ANGUS. That's true: you're not the sort
To want to kill a man, and then get off
Scot-free—but, whether or no, 'twould be manslaughter.
I kill a woman here—and it is murder:
She kills me—and it's done in self-defence:
That's justice nowadays. But come, my haggard,
Enough of fighting. You know you never meant—
And if you did, I like you better for it.
You're the first woman that's stood up to me.
You're my true mate, and put me on my mettle:
And now, by God, I'll tame you! Ay, you'll pay
The price! I'm just stark crazy for . . .

(ANGUS *makes a sudden swoop on ESTHER. She flings out an arm to ward him off, and catches him under the jawl. He reels back, hangs a moment on the edge, then topples over with a cry. ESTHER stands as if turned to stone, then sinks to the ground with a long shuddering moan, and sits motionless, gazing across the fells with unseeing eyes. Presently a figure is seen hurrying up the slope, and ADAH BURN appears, half-dressed and with her hair streaming behind her. Seeing ESTHER crouching in the grass, she rushes up to her and seizes her roughly by the arm.*)

ADAH. You're here alone? I thought I heard . . . My God!

You're not alone—say that you're not alone ?
 I wakened in the night, to find you gone—
 And then I saw it all as plain as day :
 It shivered through me like a flash of wildfire—
 Your words . . . You said . . . My God ! Why didn't I see
 The murder in your eyes when you were talking,
 So that I might have saved . . . Oh, woman, say—
 Say you've not murdered . . . Say he never came !
 You tempted him that you might murder him—
 But he's not come yet . . . and I'm still in time ?

ESTHER. He's lying at the crag-foot.

ADAH.

And you killed him ?

I might have known—you with your icy eyes
 And your cold-blooded jealousy. You fiend !
 To stand there jesting of the hangman's rope—
 And all the while you meant . . . But you shall hang :
 You'll not escape : I'd drag you to the gallows—
 Murderess, murderess ! Ay, I'll cry it out
 To all the world ! To do it in cold blood !
 Hot-blooded killing I could understand :
 I've half a mind myself to . . . And to think
 An adder such as you could do to death
 A man like Angus ! There never was a man
 Like him—and now he's broken. Pity me :
 Tell me I'm dreaming, Esther : waken me.
 It's just a nightmare : take me in your arms
 And wake me with a kiss and comfort me.

ESTHER (*in a low voice*). Addie !

ADAH.

You fiend ! Don't touch me ! And to think
 You were my sister—and now ! Oh, Angus, Angus !

(*She sinks to the ground in a half-swoon and lies moaning.*

ESTHER does not stir. Another figure appears climbing
 the slope, and LUCY EARNSHAW toils up, panting, and
 sees ADAH.)

LUCY. I guessed as much. I heard the back door sneak,
 For all your stealthy tricks. I've never slept
 A wink this blessed night on my lone bed :
 And when I heard the door I sat upright
 In time to see you sneaking through the yard.
 Then I was sure. It's more than flesh and blood
 Can bear. (*Catching sight of ESTHER*) My sakes ! Two wenches !
 Where's my husband ?

ADAH. Your husband, woman ? I ken naught of him :
I only know my man lies at the crag-foot.

LUCY. Your man ?

ADAH. Ay, Angus.

LUCY. Yours !

ADAH. All mine, all mine—

And Esther's murdered him.

LUCY. What, Angus dead !

ADAH. Dead—dead : and she shall hang.

LUCY. I'll not believe

That any wench could murder such a man.
She tempted him—God knows, I ken too well
He needed little tempting ; and he slipped
On the crag's edge—he always was foolhardy :
And now she wants to say she murdered him
To save her virtue, and so get sympathy.
But I shall tell the truth out : she shan't brag,
The slut, she's done away with such as him—
The like of Angus murdered by a doxy !
Ay, but the world shall learn the truth—I'll have
My husband righted !

*(As she speaks, RACHEL EARNSHAW, who has been toiling
up the slope unobserved, approaches, and catches the last
words.)*

RACHEL. Spoken like a wife !

But has the world gone watty, that you stand
Screeching on crag-tops to the moon at midnight
Like witches, you and your wenches ? When I waked,
I felt the house was empty ; and so I rose
And went from room to room ; and only Alec
Was sleeping sound : and then I saw folk running—
Two light-heels running it like hare and hound
Across the fell ; and, being a sport, I followed.
And so there's three here ? I saw only two.
Where's Angus ? He's a night-bird ; and I fancied . . .
But happen three . . .

ADAH. He's lying at the crag-foot ;
And Esther's . . .

RACHEL. Killed him ? Never say she's killed him ?
She had the pluck ? I never had the pluck . . .
I mind now she said " bloodshed ", but I fancied
She was just seeing red : I little dreamt . .

In his hot lust she killed him—in his pride,
 Rejoicing like a lion in his strength !
 I never had the courage—though I've loathed
 Men's ways with women . . . Killed him ; and sits there
 Proud as a queen in some old Bible story.
 Esther, say you ? Nay, Judith in the tent . . .

ADAH. She is a murderess, and she'll hang.

RACHEL.

Shame, wench !

(To ESTHER) You've done a bloody deed, and you must suffer,
 For pipes and timbrels have gone out of fashion :
 You've killed my son, and I should curse you for it—
 But, well, you've got to live, so where's the need
 For cursing ? And he's dead, past cure of curses.
 And who am I to blame you, when I've gripped,
 Ay, many times, the knife-haft in my neave
 Myself ? though I'd not pluck to put an end to . . .
 And now, father and son ! And only Alec
 Slumbering in his bed—the bed he'll die in
 Easily : no wild stirk or mankeen heifer,
 Seeing red, will cut off Alec in his prime ;
 He'll see his children's children at Windwhistle.
 The world was made for slow-wits, and their seed
 Inheriteth the earth. And Angus lies,
 Dashed to destruction by the fire of life
 That blazed within him, only to destroy him . . .
 And once I'd weep if he but cut a finger !
 But you whose hand . . . there's no escape for you :
 They'll never string you up : they seldom hang
 A woman nowadays.

ESTHER (*starting up*). Ay, he said that.

RACHEL. He said that, did he ?

ESTHER.

I'd forgotten that.

(ESTHER *turns to the edge of the crag and peers over.*)

RACHEL. Hold her—she'll fall !

ADAH.

Not she : she's peeping down

And gloating over him.

(ESTHER *draws herself to her full height, stands rigid for a moment, and then plunges over the precipice. The three women stand gazing at the spot spell-bound.*)

RACHEL.

Escaped ! Escaped !

She's had the pluck to gan her own gait—ay !

(Turning to ADAH) You fool, she's done you !

ADAH.

Ay, she's gone to him !

RACHEL. Both broken—and they might have been such mates,
And bred such bairns, if they'd not met too late.
The waste of it !

LUCY (*in a dazed voice*). She stood right up, and leapt . . .
But I'll not have it said she murdered him,
And then took her own time, and killed herself.
That was no ending for a man like him.

RACHEL. You'd make a story—say they leapt together ?

LUCY. 'Twould be more like my Angus.

RACHEL.

Sure enough

'Twould make a pretty tale—the Lovers' Leap !

GANGRELS



RED ROWAN

PERSONS

WEAZEL, *an old horse-coper.*

SLIM JIM }
HAREHEELS } *young horse-copers.*

RED ROWAN, *an old woman.*

BLACKADDER }
NETTLE } *young women.*

ALBERT EDWARD HIGGS (*of London*), *a tramp.*

SCENE.—*A horse-copers' camp near Yetholm, on the Border. It is a fine evening in late September, and WEAZEL, SLIM JIM, HAREHEELS, BLACKADDER, and NETTLE lie about the fire on which their supper is cooking in a pot slung from a forked stake. To the left at the back is a muggers' cart, seen end-on, with an arched canvas tilt. RED ROWAN stands near it looking down on the company round the fire.*

RED ROWAN (*to BLACKADDER*). You telling fortunes, you—
a chit like you,

Sneaking my customers with your saucy eyes
And fleeching flum ! A deal you ken of fortunes—
Cheating the gonerels with your jookery-pawkry !
You should think shame to rook them of their earnings.

BLACKADDER. Well, I could tell your fortune anyhow,
And free of charge.

RED ROWAN. My fortune !

BLACKADDER. Ay, no need
To rob your stocking to cross my palm.

RED ROWAN. You dare !
No one has ever told Red Rowan's fortune.
What's the world coming to ! Why in my day . . .

BLACKADDER. Your day? The day before the flood, I take it?
The world's been washed since then.

RED ROWAN. You jezebel!
I'll teach you . . .

BLACKADDER. Ay, and time to take to teaching,
When you're past the doing.

RED ROWAN. Past . . . But I ken too well
Who 'tis encourages you—the poor old dooby,
Sporting the gaudy neckerchiefs you buy him
With the brass you've cheated me out of—rooking pigeons
To peacock Weazel into a holy-bizen
With red and yellow chokers, when it's time
He should be wearing black for his own funeral!

WEAZEL. You mind your business.

RED ROWAN. And it's not my business
When a young slut buys fairings for my man?
In my day . . .

WEAZEL. Your day's over.

RED ROWAN. Ay—and yours?

WEAZEL. A man's day's never over till he's straked.

RED ROWAN. While a fresh petticoat, you mean . . .

WEAZEL. Just so.

NETTLE. Naught left for you now, Grannie, but saying prayers.

HAREHEELS. And so Blackadder bought that kerchief, did she?

BLACKADDER. She did: let's hear what you've to say about it.

RED ROWAN. Ay, Hareheels, my fine lurcher, you're cut out
By that old dog. Your doxy . . .

HAREHEELS. Hold your jaw
You randy! You look after your own man,
And I'll . . .

BLACKADDER. You'll?

NETTLE. Nay, but Hareheels mustn't quarrel
With Weazel's leavings, when it's all he'll get.

SLIM JIM. A bare shank-bone!

NETTLE. Ay, Grannie fares the best—
She's got a braw young fancy-man. Those two . . .

SLIM JIM. A cuckoo mated to a carrion-crow!

HAREHEELS. I'd see the hag to hell . . .

WEAZEL. Now, no bad language.
A little pleasant chaff among old friends
Is well enough, and helps to pass the time;

But I won't let a lady be insulted :
And, Hareheels, lad, you should respect grey hairs.

RED ROWAN. Grey hairs !

WEAZEL. Ay, lass, the flame's gone out of yours—
Red Rowan turned to old man's beard.

RED ROWAN. Old man's !

WEAZEL. A bonnie flare it was when you were young—
I've never known a fierier poll ; but ashes
Are the end of every camp-fire, and the blithest
Burns out the quickest.

RED ROWAN. Ay, yet you may find
A spark still smoulders hot beneath the ash.
Old man's ! And you're a nice young man to talk,
With a pow like a dandelion-clock, half-blown :
And who'll respect grey hairs, when an old man lets
Himself be made a fool of by a slut
With a poll like a tar-brush ?

WEAZEL. Dandelion-clocks
Whiles take the fancy of wenches—" This day, some day . . . "

RED ROWAN. Ay, till they've puffed them bald—and you forget
How the game ends : it's " This day, some day—never ! "

WEAZEL. I'll take my chance. When the old fire's burnt out
It's time to strike the camp—rain-puddled ash
Won't warm an old man's bones.

RED ROWAN. You'll let that trollop
Make a mommet of you ?

BLACKADDER. Leave me out of it,
The two of you, if you must vent your minds
In radgy slack. I'll not be parcelled out
To any man. If I've a turn for Hareheels,
He'll serve my turn : and if I fancy Weazel
He'll be my fancy-man—so there's an end.

SLIM JIM. How about little Jim ?

NETTLE. You dare to monkey . . .

BLACKADDER. End, did I say ? There'll never be an end
While there's a man can striddle a horse.

NETTLE. You dare
To monkey with Jim !

BLACKADDER. I'll leave Slim Jim to you.
He's got what he deserves ; and I'll not rob you
Of your one chance. You and Red Rowan fancy
There are no other men in the world for me

Than Weazel, Hareheels, and Slim Jim. Who knows
What callant may be galloping even now
To swing me to his saddle ?

RED ROWAN (*to* WEAZEL). You hear the baggage ?
You'll let . . .

BLACKADDER. He'll let ? You'll let ? Your reign is done :
You've queened it long enough : I'm mistress now ;
And don't you dare to turn your tongue on me—
Nay, nor your eyes : you cannot play the witch
On me : my eye's a match for any eye.
I'm nothing daunted by an old wife's glower ;
So save your evil eye for scaring bairns
And screwing sixpences from nowts in trousers.

RED ROWAN. A sump of puddled ash ! Yet in my day . . .
Hark, jezebel, your fire is bonnie enough ;
But you'll burn out some day, and then you'll find
What men are.

BLACKADDER. Happen : but while I burn, I'll burn ;
And men may find they're only faggots to feed
My fire.

RED ROWAN. Ay, ay, and so I thought at your age.
My eye was once as bright, my breasts as full . . .

BLACKADDER. And as for women . . . Oh, but you have ridden
Us wenches hard and lashed us with your tongue :
But I'm in the saddle now—your turn to smart !
I've slutted for you long : but I'm no bairn now
For you to bray half-silly with your neave.

WEAZEL. Who bangs the bairn must aye look out for bangs
When the hempy's old enough to handle the broomstick.

BLACKADDER. When you've an arm like mine, old spindle-
shanks,

Then you can make me do your bidding—now
You'll slut for me : and, as for Weazel . . .

WEAZEL. Ay,
Blackadder is the filly for my money.

RED ROWAN. Well, if you're set on breaking your old neck,
Riding Black Beauty to the devil, no use
For me to waste my wind. I'd better leave you
To manage her yourself, and wish you joy.
I'll just turn in, for I've no mind to clarty
My manners, swapping compliments with such
A muckhut.

BLACKADDER. So ?

SLIM JIM. The queen is dead—long live . . .

HAREHEELS. I'm blasted if I'll . . .

WEAZEL. Not a doubt of it :

But keep it to yourself unless you want
To hoof it. Let Blackadder tip the wink
She doesn't like your language—and you'll scoot.

RED ROWAN. The poor blind dobbie !

NETTLE. Well, anyway, he's master—

Though we've a brand-new mistress seemingly :

But she needn't think she's going to boss . . .

WEAZEL. You'll do

Blackadder's bidding.

NETTLE. I'll . . .

WEAZEL. You'll take your hook—

You and Hareheels, if I've another word

From either.

RED ROWAN. Kiss the dust, the pair of you ;

And let her trample . . .

SLIM JIM. Time, Grannie, you were creeping

Into your lonesome bed ; and don't forget

To say your prayers.

RED ROWAN. I'll save my breath : you're all

Past praying for.

SLIM JIM. Good-night and sweet repose,

And it's all the bed to-night and all the clothes !

WEAZEL. You young folk are too hard. A little chaff

Hurts no one, but . . .

(WEAZEL breaks off with a shake of the head, as RED ROWAN climbs into the cart and disappears behind the curtain of the tilt. A moment after, ALBERT EDWARD HIGGS, a podgy tramp, enters stealthily behind the company round the fire, unnoticed. He stands eyeing the group and looking round the camp ; then snuffing the fumes from the pot with relish, he speaks as if to himself in a soft wheezy voice.)

ALBERT EDWARD. And such a lovely mare !

(They all turn their heads to look up at him : but he still stands with rapt eyes, as if contemplating something at a distance. His back is to the cart. Presently a corner of the tilt is lifted, and RED ROWAN peers out at the unconscious tramp.)

WEAZEL. Hullo ! What's this ?

NETTLE. Blackadder, here's your callant
Come galloping to you on shanks's mare.

WEAZEL. Ay, that's about the only nag, I'd wager,
He's any knowledge of.

ALBERT EDWARD. These blinking eyes
Never saw the like of her.

NETTLE. Blackadder ?

ALBERT EDWARD. Style !
And, as for action—talk of Rotten Row !

WEAZEL. What's the old geezer gabbing about ?

ALBERT EDWARD. A spanker !
The king's coach-horses aren't in it.

WEAZEL. Squat, old sport,
And let us know what maggot's worrying you.

ALBERT EDWARD. Such form—such elegance ! And to be
had

Just for the slipping of a knot.

WEAZEL (*starting to his feet*). What's that ?
Speak up, old gent.

(*The others rise quietly and cluster about the tramp.*)

ALBERT EDWARD. To think she might be mine,
If only I had been a younger man
And not so portly, not so like my namesake—
The Albert Edwards seem to run to fat,
Although my mother was no Queen Victoria,
No feather bed . . .

WEAZEL. But where's the bonnie mare ?

ALBERT EDWARD. Tied to a post outside. . . . O vanished
youth !

To think, because a few short years have combed
My golden curls out and destroyed my figure,
I must lose such a prize ! The price she'd fetch
At Tattersalls !

WEAZEL. Why can't you speak out plain
And tell . . .

ALBERT EDWARD. And all because of gout and asthma !
Genteel complaints, and in the family—
My father was a martyr . . .

WEAZEL. Devil take
Your father and you, if you . . .

ALBERT EDWARD. Oh, my poor breath !

And her sot of a master lying like a log,
Blind drunk and helpless.

HAREHEELS. Look here, old broken bellows,
If you don't tell us, and sharp . . .

ALBERT EDWARD. You fluster me,
The lot of you. I might be an accident,
The way you all keep crowding round and shoving,
Move farther off, and let me get my breath.
How can I tell . . . But it's not only my bellows
That's broken, but my heart, to think of her
Left with that drunken brute.

BLACKADDER. Come, stow that gammon,
Or something else of yours will soon be broken.

ALBERT EDWARD. Lady, you understand? A woman's
heart . . .

BLACKADDER. A woman's hand will take you by the neck
And snap it like a kex, if you don't tell us
Where 'twas you saw the mare. Come, jerk it out!

ALBERT EDWARD. It's been a weakness with me all my life :
I don't regret it, but I never could
Refuse a lady. Such a pair of eyes—
Black diamonds!

BLACKADDER. You leave my eyes alone.

ALBERT EDWARD. My mother had black eyes. I've always had
A tender spot . . .

SLIM JIM. You'll have a tenderer spot,
And black eyes like your mother, into the bargain,
If you don't tell us . . .

ALBERT EDWARD. Who's addressing you?
I'm talking with this lady. Can't we have
A little *tête-à-tête*, but you barge in
With your coarse notions?

BLACKADDER (*seizing* ALBERT EDWARD *by the collar*).

Gox, I'll tatertate you!

Just spit it out or I'll . . .

ALBERT EDWARD. Oh, my poor breath!
Such sudden affection at my time of life
Is more than I . . . Restrain yourself, my dear.

BLACKADDER. You windywallops! I'll twist your . . .

ALBERT EDWARD. Patience, patience!
If there's one fault the gentle sex has . . . Ow!
You're choking me, my love!

BLACKADDER.

I'll throttle you.

Where is that mare ?

ALBERT EDWARD (*gasping*). Outside The Traveller's Rest.

(BLACKADDER releases him, and WEAZEL and SLIM JIM begin to move off down the road.)

ALBERT EDWARD. Now I can breathe. But where are you two off to ?

WEAZEL (*stopping and turning*). To fetch the mare for you.

ALBERT EDWARD. Now that's real kind—

Christian, I call it. It's not every day

I come across real gentlemen—going off .

Without a word to do a kindly deed.

But do you think two'll manage ? Hadn't some one

Better drop in to have a drink and keep

The landlord busy, while the other two . . .

Though doubtless you know best. I'll just sit down,

And get my wind to entertain the ladies

While you're away. My poor heart's palpitating.

A hug like that at my age ! I'm not used . . .

Though I can't blame the wench—she's not the first

That's cottoned up to Albert Edward Higgs.

So I'll just take things easy till you bring

My mare to me.

(*The tramp sits down by the fire with his back to the cart, still unconscious of RED ROWAN'S eye watching him.*)

WEAZEL (*to HAREHEELS, who makes as if to accompany them*).

You needn't come : we'll manage.

HAREHEELS. You fancy I'd trust you two !

BLACKADDER.

I'm coming as well.

I couldn't trust that mare with any man.

NETTLE. If she's to go, I'll not be left behind—

Though it's not a mare I cannot trust with men.

WEAZEL. Now, have some sense. It's just a one-horse show :

And when I go to view a mare, I'm not

For travelling with a gairishon. You'll give

The game away among you—such a gang :

And anyway we can't all go and leave . . .

ALBERT EDWARD. Don't worry about me : you needn't stand On ceremony with me. I'm not the sort

Easily takes offence : and I'll just snooze.

BLACKADDER. He's safe enough, the wheezy saveloy !

I could settle him single-handed. He'll not bolt.

WEAZEL (*catching sight of RED ROWAN'S eye peering from under the tilt*).

He'd better not try it on, if I'm a judge.
But such a gang!—though you two wenches might
Be cracking with the company in the bar
While we . . .

ALBERT EDWARD. The very thing! Who'd have a thought
For mares while two such charmers . . . It's my loss;
But I must try and bear up while you're away:
And keep an eye on things.

WEAZEL. Only an eye.
If you lay as much as a finger on the gear
You'll not be portly when we've done with you.

(They steal out in single file, leaving the tramp stretched out by the fire with his eyes closed. When they are well out of hearing, he sits up and winks; then rises briskly and looks cautiously round. By the time his eyes reach the cart, RED ROWAN has dropped the curtain of the tilt, and disappeared from sight.)

ALBERT EDWARD. What ho! The coast is clear and all serene!

To it, my hearties! Once aboard the lugger . . .
A mile and a half, at least, to The Traveller's Rest.
I'll just have time for a snack, and a look about me
To see if there's aught worth picking up—not much
Of a Tommy Tiddler's ground by the look of it;
But you never know what you'll find in a coper's cart:
They've a knack of raking in queer odds and ends,
Knocking about the country. I've been surprised
Before to-day. I may have struck it lucky.

(He picks up a plate and spoon from the ground, and helps himself to stew from the pot. As he does so with his back to the cart, RED ROWAN unhooks the curtain of the tilt, which drops down silently; then sits, motionless, like an alabaster idol under the dark arch, her grizzled hair on her shoulders, and her eyes fixed on the tramp's back.)

ALBERT EDWARD. Hare, by the sniff of it—I've always had
A weakness for jugged hare. Damn it, it's hot!
Well, I'll just set it down to cool a bit
While I look round. . . . Ow! but I've got the shivers;
And there's cold water trickling down my spine:

I must have caught a chill—these frosty nights . . .

Now for the lugger, to see . . .

(Turning his head, he catches sight of RED ROWAN. She does not stir or speak, but sits with eyes fixed on him.)

ALBERT EDWARD.

What ho, she bumps!

(Recovering himself) Your pardon, lady—I thought I was alone.

I'm the new cook, just tasting the stew to see . . .

Another pinch of salt, or half a pinch,

If you would kindly hand me out the salt-box—

And a dash of pepper wouldn't come amiss.

But, blimey, am I talking to a lady,

Or Cleopatra's mummy? It's a waxwork

For sure—no lady could have held her tongue

So long. I'm always sorry for wax ladies

In shows, or smirking in the barbers' windows—

And they without a tongue to wag. But, lordy,

To think I should be scared by two glass eyes!

I once glanced over my shoulder and saw an owl

Glaring down on me just so—I don't like owls,

Their eyes or voices: I've heard too much of them

These last few nights: it gets into the blood

And curdles it, that screeching—and when the eyes

Moved . . . Higgs, your nerves aren't what they were, my boy:

It's time you lay up in your winter quarters:

These hills and foggy nights . . . Why, you'll be seeing

Ghosts, and mistaking owls for witches next,

If you can't look a waxwork in the eyes.

(RED ROWAN moves her eyes slowly round. The tramp starts.)

Jerusalem! *(Recovering)* Not bad for a travelling show. . . .

Yet who the devil dropped the curtain down?

I could have sworn, when I looked round just now,

There was no blinking image.

RED ROWAN.

Who are you calling

A blinking image?

ALBERT EDWARD. Bust me, if it isn't

Madame Tussaud herself! Your pardon, madam,

But I mistook you . . .

RED ROWAN *(twisting up her hair)*. So you'd have a snack:
Then see what you could pick up in the cart?

Queer odds and ends in copers' carts? You've struck
Your lucky!

ALBERT EDWARD. Jestings, jestings !

RED ROWAN.

Once aboard . . .

ALBERT EDWARD. Only a favourite wheeze—you know it ?

Once

Aboard the lugger, and the girl is mine !

RED ROWAN (*climbing down from the cart*). She is.

ALBERT EDWARD (*stepping back*).

She is ?

RED ROWAN.

The girl is yours !

ALBERT EDWARD.

O lordy,

You never thought I meant . . . It's just a saying—

Gammon, you know. I've always had a turn

For poetry ; and everybody knows

Poetry's all-my-eye-and-Betty-Martin.

RED ROWAN. Nothing I ken of Betty ; but I ken

When you leave here, I'm going with you.

ALBERT EDWARD.

Blimey !

You never mean . . .

RED ROWAN. I mean just what I'm saying.

ALBERT EDWARD. You wouldn't quit . . .

RED ROWAN.

I'm going to be a quitter,

Before I'm quitted.

ALBERT EDWARD. I see—been having words ?

Was it with young black eyes ?

RED ROWAN.

The jezebel !

She, telling fortunes and buying neckerchiefs

For men who are old enough to be her granddad !

ALBERT EDWARD. Plainer and plainer—Love and Jealousy,

May and December, or The Old Man's Darling :

A Drama of High Life, in penny numbers ?

RED ROWAN. Me—jealous of thon jezebel !

ALBERT EDWARD.

Come, come,

Old lady, don't take on so.

RED ROWAN.

Who are you calling

Old lady ? You're no two-year-old yourself.

Old lady, indeed !

ALBERT EDWARD. A slip ! But what are words ?

Just wind—and soon blow over. You and black-eyes

Will make it up, and you'll be bosom friends

Before you know.

RED ROWAN. Ay, it will need to be

Before I know. Where are you bound for, Stumpy ?

ALBERT EDWARD. My winter quarters: I can't stand the North

In winter : it's too chilly and too creepy.

We winter in the South : I'm the last swallow—

The last rose of summer left blooming alone . . .

RED ROWAN.

And where . . .

ALBERT EDWARD. My lovely companions all faded . . .

RED ROWAN.

Where may be . . .

ALBERT EDWARD. My winter quarters ? Why, in London, of course—

Whitechapel way : my Park Lane house is let

For the season to Ikey . . .

RED ROWAN.

London ?

ALBERT EDWARD.

Wherever else

Could any gentleman winter ?

RED ROWAN.

That will do :

I've always had a fancy to live in London.

We may as well be stepping.

ALBERT EDWARD.

You're not serious ?

You're gammoning—just kidding me ? You can't

Pull Albert Edward's leg, or Higgs's either.

You never mean . . .

RED ROWAN.

Where you go, I go too.

ALBERT EDWARD. Well, I'll be hanged !

RED ROWAN.

Likely—but I'll not promise

To follow you further than the gallows' foot :

But, short of that, you'll not escape . . .

ALBERT EDWARD.

You fancy

I'd saddle myself with a hag ?

RED ROWAN (*eyeing him with a smile*). A what ?

ALBERT EDWARD.

Blue murder !

Don't look at me like that—those eyes . . .

RED ROWAN.

A what ?

ALBERT EDWARD. Pardon, a slip !

RED ROWAN.

I've known a slip like that

Wrench a man's ankle and shoot pains through him

Till the flesh shredded off his burning bones.

ALBERT EDWARD.

I say, old lady, you know my heart's not strong ;

And I can't stand those eyes of yours—they make

My flesh creep : there's a crawling in my bones. . . .

RED ROWAN.

Cold maggots in your marrow ? Now you know

Red Rowan means all that Red Rowan says.

ALBERT EDWARD (*backing away*). Take you with me? I'd sooner take a ghost

Now, no offence—but I'm not over strong.

You're an old dear, of course, but all the same

There's something not quite nice about your eyes—

And as for conversation! No, I couldn't!

I'm sorry, but it's *au revoir*! I'm off.

RED ROWAN. Without the mare?

ALBERT EDWARD (*chuckling*). I'm leaving her to you—

A souvenir: that's French for compensation—

A little plaster for a broken heart:

And such a mare! There never was a mare . . .

RED ROWAN. That's so—a wild-goose chase you've sent them on!

ALBERT EDWARD. Upon my soul . . . but you're too cute for me:

You know a thing or two, I see, Old Bean:

But anyhow, if they don't find the mare,

They cannot miss her nest.

RED ROWAN. And what do you fancy

They'll do when they come back and find . . .

ALBERT EDWARD. They'll not

Find Albert Edward.

RED ROWAN. And when they learn you tried

To pinch their gear?

ALBERT EDWARD. Oh, I'll be far enough

By then; and they'll be tired.

RED ROWAN. You've never heard

Of witches?

ALBERT EDWARD. Witches!

RED ROWAN. Ay, and second sight?

ALBERT EDWARD. O lordy, don't you tell me you're a witch!

RED ROWAN. Tell you? And didn't you feel your blood run cold,

And adders slithering up your spine, when I

Sat looking down on you? Didn't you feel my eye

Like a gimlet screwing your skull . . .

ALBERT EDWARD. The evil eye—

You've got the evil eye!

RED ROWAN. Make no mistake:

Whether I go with you or whether I stay,

You can't escape my eye, sleeping or waking.

Each step you take my eye will follow you—

No use to hide; a stone wall's just a window

To second sight; and if you locked yourself

In Carlisle gaol my eye would find you out,
 And fix you till you couldn't sup your skilly ;
 And you'd just waste away, the fat would melt
 In sweat, drip-dripping from your ribs until
 You were just a burnt-out tallow-dip ; and when
 The warders came to strap you and lug you out
 For hanging, there'd be nothing left to hang.

ALBERT EDWARD. Stop it, old lady !

RED ROWAN.

Don't old lady me !

But I'll not let you hide yourself in gaol
 Till Weazel's wrung your neck, and Slim Jim's jabbed
 Your jaw, and Hareheels clog-danced on your chest,
 Scrunching your ribs like faggots—crackle, crackle :
 Ay, and Blackadder . . .

ALBERT EDWARD. Mercy ! Draw it mild !

RED ROWAN. Mild, did you say ? That's only mother's milk
 To what I'll make you swallow. I could blister
 Your thrapple with a dose . . .

ALBERT EDWARD. I've had enough :

I've never been a soaker—always known
 The time to stop ; and I meant no offence.

RED ROWAN. Nor I—but I am going to travel with you.
 I won't bide here and let thon jezebel
 Badger and bullyrag me all day long.
 And Weazel, he would leave me in the ditch
 To die, as like as not—and he new-fangled
 With every fresh red flannel petticoat
 Catches his eye ! And winter coming on . . .
 The frosts go through my bones now like cold needles,
 Turning the marrow to ice ; and I've a notion
 To winter betwixt four walls. I'm getting on—
 Too old for the road, it seems. I never fancied
 The fire'd burn out to ashes. Let him mind
 He doesn't scorch his fingers with his new flame—
 The black-eyed jezebel ! I'm sick to death
 Of the whole gangrel crew.

*(The tramp has stolen behind her and tries to sidle off
 unnoticed.)*

You'd sneak away
 Without me, would you ? But my eye is on you,
 Although I've got my back to you.

ALBERT EDWARD *(stopping)*. No, no—

I only meant . . . I wouldn't dream of going
Without you.

RED ROWAN. Nay, you'll never dream again
Without my knowing all that's in your mind,
My bonnie birkie. When you sleep my eye
Will burrow, a red maggot in your brain,
Eating your thoughts up—ay, and starving on them.
But come, we'd best be making ourselves scarce
Before they're back, unless you'd rather wait ?

ALBERT EDWARD. Well, if it's a choice between . . .

RED ROWAN. No choice for you—
Though you'd scarce be worth the taking, when they'd finished :
Poor company, a rackle of broken bones !
Weazel will miss me.

ALBERT EDWARD. Miss you ! ay, who wouldn't ?

RED ROWAN. You're coming, Stumpy ? Well, we'd best
step out.

ALBERT EDWARD. Ay, if it must be " we " : but isn't there
A dowry with the lady—a spoon or so ?
A little property won't come amiss. (*Looking round.*)
Now in that cart ?

RED ROWAN. Haven't you had enough
Out of the cart ? You said you'd been surprised
Before to-day.

ALBERT EDWARD. Never ! And, what is more,
I'll never be surprised again in this life.

RED ROWAN. You can't be sure until I've done with you.
We're just beginning life together : I've still
A trick or two up my sleeve might startle you.
But we'll not take a spoon with us—if we did,
They'd follow us for certain.

ALBERT EDWARD. Right you are.

RED ROWAN. You're learning sense—and right I'll be for
you
Until you're snug between the coffin-boards ;
And even then you'll not escape my eye—
A red-hot gimlet worming through the deal.

ALBERT EDWARD. Oh, don't start that again : it isn't nice—
And me with chronic asthma, and a heart.

RED ROWAN. Your asthma and my rheumatics should keep
pace
And jog along together cannily.

ALBERT EDWARD. Albert, you're hooked ; Edward, you're hooked ; and Higgs, You're hooked and landed. Well, jump up, old girl, Behind me on the mare.

RED ROWAN. The mare ?

ALBERT EDWARD (*starting off*). Ay, shanks's. There never was a lovelier mare—such action, Such elegance !

RED ROWAN (*following*). I little dreamt I'd come To hoof it with a gaberlunzie-man !

BLACKADDER

PERSONS

HAREHEELS }
SLIM JIM } *horse-copers.*
BLACKADDER.
NETTLE.
JACK BENSON, *a disabled soldier.*

SCENE.—*A horse-copers' camp by a Border stream on a fine spring morning. The camp-fire is dying out, and the muggers' cart, with its canvas tilt, is packed for travelling. HAREHEELS and SLIM JIM are polishing harness, and BLACKADDER is washing dishes in the stream. NETTLE, with a shawl over her head and carrying a large market-basket over her arm, comes from behind the cart and, shuffling towards BLACKADDER, stands looking down on her sullenly.*

BLACKADDER (*looking up*). Well ?

NETTLE. Don't you dare say "well" to me like that.

BLACKADDER. Like what ?

NETTLE. Like what—I'll let you see like what.

I'll teach you I'm not clart beneath your clogs.

BLACKADDER. What's wrong ?

NETTLE. What's wrong ? You well may ask what's wrong !
You'll soon find out ; and I can tell you this much
To keep you going—you may as tite know now—
This is the last time I'll run errands for you.

BLACKADDER. For me ?

NETTLE. Ay, it's been you from morn to night,
Waited on hand and foot, since you drove away
Red Rowan from her own man, and twisted him
Round your little finger, the poor doting dobbey !

But, now that Weazel's dead and underground,
 You'll find you cannot queen it over us.
 You said her reign was over—do you mind ?
 Well, yours has been a shorter one, my lady.

BLACKADDER. You've got the basket ? When you bring it
 back

I'll talk to you. If you stand blathering there,
 You'll be forgetting half of what I told you
 To fetch from the village.

NETTLE. And next time I'll forget
 To go at all : it's you'll be carrying
 The basket.

BLACKADDER. You're for leaving us ?

NETTLE. I leave !

BLACKADDER. The way you're talking, it seems you've got a
 mind

To take Red Rowan's road.

NETTLE. You little ken !

BLACKADDER. I only ken if you stop daundering there
 You'll follow her, and double-quick.

NETTLE. Your man

Happen will have a word to say to you
 If you try on tricks with me.

BLACKADDER. My man ?

NETTLE. Your master.

BLACKADDER. Master—who's he ?

NETTLE. Hareheels.

BLACKADDER. My master ?

NETTLE. Ay,

Now Weazel's buried, Hareheels has a mind
 To take you back ; and he's the master now.

BLACKADDER. You've settled it ?

NETTLE. Not I : I'm not the sort

To settle things for men : I'd never snatch
 The reins from men folk's hands : but one thing's certain—
 We're none of us from this on going to do
 The bidding of a petticoat.

BLACKADDER. I see.

NETTLE. Hareheels and Jim . . .

BLACKADDER. The three of you have put

Your noddles together, trying to make one head ?

(*Calling*) Hareheels !

(HAREHEELS goes on polishing without taking any notice.)

NETTLE (*to HAREHEELS*). Now don't you hear her majesty ?
Jump to it, lad !

HAREHEELS. I'll come when I've a mind to.

BLACKADDER. Hareheels, it's time you took the mare to get
That hind shoe seen to.

HAREHEELS (*rising and slouching forward*). Who are you
ordering ?

BLACKADDER. You'll soon find out.

HAREHEELS. Not I, my lass—it's you
Will do the finding out. I'm master now,
As Nettle says, and I'll not let my doxy
Be bossing me. By gox, I've stood enough
From you and Weazel—that old devil sneaking
My woman from me ! He hooked it just in time
To save his thrapple, the varmint : I'd have slit
The weasands of the pair of you, I would,
If I'd to swing for it. You give a squint
At any other man, and I'll . . .

BLACKADDER. Ay, ay,
You're the braw cock-a-ride-a-roosie now
That Weazel's dead.

HAREHEELS. Well, anyway no hen
Shall rule the roost : as Nettle says . . .

BLACKADDER. As Nettle ?
Seemingly you've been listening to hen's cackle ?
And so it's Nettle that's to rule the roost ?
You'd better mate with her, my cockmadendy :
Dare say Slim Jim won't mind.

NETTLE. You . . . but Slim Jim
Will talk to you himself. I ken my place :
I'm no loose-petticoat : but such as you
Don't understand a decent woman's feelings.

BLACKADDER. Slim Jim will talk ? So he's to have a chance
At last ? Yet he seems shy : happen he's lost
The use of his tongue—he's had to keep it quiet
So long, poor dummy !

NETTLE. You hear her ?

SLIM JIM. Ay, I hear ;
But I'll just leave you two to settle with her.

NETTLE. You call yourself a man ! Just wait till I . . .

BLACKADDER. It seems that Slim Jim kens his place : he's wise.

SLIM JIM. Nay, but I'm with them—and no petticoat . . .

BLACKADDER. Well, you've both got your lesson off pat, good boys !

No petticoat ? You've given up your trousers
To Nettle, you and Hareheels ? Well, she's welcome
To the brace of you : it leaves me free.

NETTLE.

You slut—

You radgy slut !

HAREHEELS. Nay, leave the wench to me.

I'll break her yet : I'll take my way with her :

She'll learn that she's a woman—I'm a man.

Free ! She'll soon find out what her freedom's worth

If she tries on her tricks.

BLACKADDER (*regarding him steadily*). You take the mare.

NETTLE. You'll do her bidding, Hareheels ?

HAREHEELS (*turning, after making a feeble show of defiance*).

Well, that shoe

Wants seeing to—I may as tite . . .

BLACKADDER (*to NETTLE*).

And you

Be off before . . .

NETTLE (*moving*). I'd scorn to stay and talk

With such . . . but it's the last time, mind you.

BLACKADDER.

Happen.

But where is Slim Jim off to ?

NETTLE.

What's that to you ?

And mayn't I take my man to carry my basket

Without your leave ? Likely I'd trust you two

Alone together !

BLACKADDER. Well, put a jerk in it,

The lot of you, if we're to start to-day.

(HAREHEELS goes down the road to the right, leading the mare, and NETTLE and SLIM JIM follow. BLACKADDER stands looking after them and biting her lips.)

BLACKADDER. So that's their little game.

(BLACKADDER bends down to the stream to finish her dish-washing. Presently JACK BENSON hobbles down the road from the left. He is a tall slender lad on crutches with only one leg, and looks half-starved and ill. He stops as BLACKADDER looks up.)

JACK.

Good-morning, mistress.

BLACKADDER. Good-morning.

JACK.

Well, it's something anyway

To have a lady wishing me good-morning—
If wishes would cram the belly and warm the bones . . .

BLACKADDER. You're hungry? Well, there's still a sup of tea
Left in the can: I'll heat it up for you.
You just sit down while I make up the fire.
And there's some bread and cheese. You're shivering?
It's not that cold.

JACK. Happen not by the fire;
But it might have been an iceberg, not a haystack,
I sat and shivered under all night long.
You're looking for my leg? You'll have to look
A little further, mistress, if you'd find it.
It's somewhere on the veldt—that's Africa.

BLACKADDER. You've been in Africa?

JACK. Where are your eyes,
You cannot see I've swapped my leg for a touch
Of fever?

BLACKADDER. Fever?

JACK (*sitting down*). Ay, it's not only the cold
That makes me dother: it's malaria—
The swagger name they give it to make you proud
You've not got common ague. You've to travel
To get malaria, while poor stay-at-homes . . .

BLACKADDER. Come, sup this, lad—'twill warm your bones
a bit.
You're ailing, surely?

JACK. So you have an eye—
A pair of them? I don't know when I saw
A bonnier pair!

BLACKADDER. You've been to Africa?
What were you after?

JACK. Pleasure, mistress, pleasure—
A little shooting-party with some friends.

BLACKADDER. Shooting?

JACK. Ay, potting Boers, or being potted:
That's how I lost my leg.

BLACKADDER. So you're a soldier?

JACK. A soldier—nay, a has-been—just a relic
Of a death-or-glory boy. I dodged the death
And got the glory—that's what makes me fat.

BLACKADDER. You're just a scarecrow.

JACK. No such blooming luck!

A boggart has no belly—and his clothes
All found for him ; and he doesn't need to hobble
On his lone shank about the countryside.

BLACKADDER. You've been to Africa—you've seen the world ?

JACK. I've seen the world—ay, more than enough of it ;
And as for Africa . . .

BLACKADDER. You've crossed the sea ?

JACK. Ay, for my sins, I have.

BLACKADDER. And fought with men ?

JACK. With men ? With hills a hundred miles away ;
And they returned the compliment, they did—
Sent me a sappy one with kind regards,
No answer needed : knocked me out, whizz-bang !
Splintered the twin of this fine leg—a pair,
A lovely pair they were—a trifle bowed
With riding, but such calves, first-prize bull-calves.

BLACKADDER. Ay, your poor leg.

JACK. Well, I've survived the loss ;
And, as things are, happen it's just as well
I haven't two to fatten. Crutches, mistress,
Don't need much blowing out.

BLACKADDER. You're naught but bones.

JACK. And aching bones at that. I've hobbled it
This twelvemonth, dot-and-carry-one, till I'm . . .

BLACKADDER. You're starved : but you'll not need to starve
again
Nor hobble another inch.

JACK. Jehoshaphat !
You mean . . . You haven't a knife about you, mistress,
To slit my thrapple ? It wouldn't be worth while
To do me in : I didn't strike diamonds—
Nay, nor a gold mine out in Africa.
So that's why you kept harping on . . . I see,
Mistook me for de Beers or Cecil Rhodes ?
But I haven't a cent about me, not a cent :
So it would be a pity to dirty your knife,
And swing for nothing—such a pretty neck !
I couldn't bear to think it should be broken :
Though, as for myself, I'd not mind overmuch.
I'm tired of travelling and I want to settle ;
And I'd as lief have you as any one
Settle me. So whip out your little penknife

And stick me quick. (*Stretching out his throat.*) This pig won't squeal. "One last

Fond look into those eyes of . . ."

BLACKADDER.

You've the nerve!

JACK. "One last fond look . . ." But sharp about it, mistress—

I cannot keep my neck stretched out much longer :

I've got a fit of shivers coming on.

BLACKADDER. And you on that wet grass ! Just take my arm :

I'll help you into the cart ; and you can sleep.

You'll feel the better . . .

JACK. Sleep ? But what about

The waking, mistress ?

BLACKADDER. You can sleep your fill.

JACK. My fill—I see : and dead men tell no tales ?

BLACKADDER. You're not dead yet : and from this on that cart

Is yours, and you can lie your length in it

All day, and welcome : no one shall disturb you

While I . . .

JACK. Jerusalem ! I'm dead already,
And never knew it ! Well, I'd kind of hoped
I'd have had two legs in heaven—but likely enough
The other's not turned up yet : it would have
Further to travel—for Africa's a deal
Nearer the other place, a sort of suburb
Of Hell you might say. Yet that leg has had
Wellnigh a three years' start : I trust it's not
Taken the wrong turn, and already frizzling.
I always thought that angels had blue eyes.

BLACKADDER. Come, up with you, before you shake yourself
To pieces.

JACK. Ay, I've got the shivery-shakers
This time, and no mistake : I'm in for it
It seems, and I don't mind if I lie down.
You're certain no one will object ?

BLACKADDER.

Object !

I'd like to see . . .

JACK. By gox, and so should I !
'Twould take a man to stand up to those eyes,
And with two legs.

BLACKADDER. Up with you, or you'll learn . . .

JACK. Here's for the golden chariot !

(BLACKADDER *helps JACK into the cart, settles him comfortably with a horse-rug over him, and then closes the canvas curtain of the tilt.*)

JACK (*his voice coming from under the tilt*). One thing, mistress,

I'd like to know before I close my peepers,

And that's—if we're all carriage-folk in heaven ?

(BLACKADDER *does not answer, but stands gazing with an abstracted air into the fire. Some time has passed when SLIM JIM and NETTLE return with the basket, followed by HAREHEELS with the mare, which he puts into the shafts of the cart, without waking JACK.*)

NETTLE. That's the last errand.

BLACKADDER.

Not for you to say.

NETTLE. Nor you.

BLACKADDER.

Nor me.

HAREHEELS.

You've learnt your lesson, have you ?

You've found your master ?

BLACKADDER.

Ay, I've found my master.

NETTLE (*laughing*). You've tamed her, Hareheels. Well, I've always held

Men should be masters. Still, I should have judged

She'd have made a bit of a fight for it.

BLACKADDER.

Less noise :

You'll waken him.

NETTLE.

Waken ? Who the devil . . .

BLACKADDER.

Your master.

NETTLE. Hareheels ? But he's not sleeping.

BLACKADDER.

I said naught

Of Hareheels.

NETTLE. Well, who else . . .

BLACKADDER.

He's in the cart,

And wants to sleep.

NETTLE.

He's in the cart ! Not Weazel—

Don't say it's Weazel ! But I saw him straked

And chested and . . .

BLACKADDER.

Your master's in the cart.

NETTLE. Don't tell me Weazel's walking ! I can't bide To think of ghosts.

HAREHEELS.

Ghosts—who's afraid of ghosts ?

NETTLE. She says that Weazel's ghost's . . .

HAREHEELS. Come back to have
His throat slit likely? Well . . .

BLACKADDER. I said your master
Was in the cart.

HAREHEELS. Her master?

BLACKADDER. Ay, and yours—
And ghost or not . . .

(BLACKADDER *breaks off as she sees the face of the soldier peeping out beneath the canvas. SLIM JIM has now come up, and he and HAREHEELS and NETTLE, following the direction of BLACKADDER'S eyes, stare at the cart in amazement.*)

NETTLE. Preserve us!

HAREHEELS. What the devil!

SLIM JIM. Thon's no ghost.

JACK. No, chum, you're right: it seems I'm not a ghost,
Although I fancied . . . But if this is heaven,
It's hanky-panky about angels' wings
And night-shirts—or, newcomers like myself,
Yours haven't begun to sprout . . .

HAREHEELS. Hop out of that!

NETTLE. So that's your master, your new fancy-man?

HAREHEELS. By gox, I'll settle him!

BLACKADDER. Dare lay a finger . . .

JACK. Now no unpleasantness—I wouldn't have
Unpleasantness on my account. The lady
Just kindly offered me a lift.

HAREHEELS. I'll lift you!

If you don't . . .

JACK. Well, you'll have to lift me, mate—
It's more than I can manage with one leg.

BLACKADDER (*to HAREHEELS*). You dare!

JACK. Nay, mistress, I've no mind to stop
Where I'm not wanted.

HAREHEELS (*helping him from the cart*). Well, you've got
some sense.

NETTLE. That your new master, your new fancy-man--
Thon shivering one-legged bag-of-bones!

BLACKADDER. You dare!

NETTLE. Thon's the braw callant—oh, I mind, I mind
Your blathering the night Red Rowan left
About a braw young callant galloping

To swing you to his saddle. Well, you're welcome
 To him—though likely Hareheels has a word
 To say to him.

HAREHEELS. I cannot slit the gullet
 Of thon lame scarecrow.

NETTLE. And you'd let Blackadder . . .

HAREHEELS. I'm through with her if thon's the sort she
 fancies—

Old daffling dobbies and hirpling tattie-jacks.

(He lifts the basket and the dishes into the cart.)

NETTLE. You're done with her? And a good riddance too.
 I wish her callant joy . . .

SLIM JIM. You hold your gob.

Blackadder, are you coming?

BLACKADDER. I'm not coming.

SLIM JIM. You'd bide with . . . Well, it's no affair of mine.

*(HAREHEELS moves off with the cart and horse, and SLIM
 JIM and NETTLE follow down the road.)*

JACK. God save our gracious! Lass, you're in the cart,
 And no mistake, now that the cart has gone
 Without you. So it seems we're left?

BLACKADDER. We're left.

JACK. Babes in the wood like—though I see no robins;
 And I must own I like the wicked uncles
 Better than auntie.

BLACKADDER. Nettle, you mean?

JACK. She would be.

Yet, bless her heart, she didn't put it badly—
 A shivering one-legged bag-of-bones, that's me,
 Jack Benson to a T—a speaking likeness,
 And no charge made! Well, I've long had a mind
 To marry and settle down. I'm tired of travelling,
 Though I little guessed . . . We never know our luck!
 And happen you've a fancy to settle?

BLACKADDER. Settle!

WINTER'S STOB

PERSONS

NEBBY PETER, *an old drover.*
CURLY DODD } *young drovers.*
SPANKER ORD }

SCENE.—*Winter's Stob on a spring morning. A flock of sheep comes up the road from the direction of Morpeth, CURLY DODD walking in front of them, and NEBBY PETER following.*

NEBBY (*calling*). Hi, lad !

CURLY (*stopping and turning his head*). What's wrong ?

NEBBY. I'm going to rest my shanks.

CURLY. So early ?

NEBBY. Ay, it's well enough for you

With your young bones : but when they've travelled as far
As mine . . .

CURLY. I've come as far.

NEBBY. This morning, ay :

But this is not the first I've walked the world.

CURLY. Nor I.

NEBBY. Oh, you're Methuselah, you are—

The Wandering Jew ! How many centuries,
May I make bold to ask, have you been traiking
Since you first set out from Jerusalem ?

CURLY. Who are you getting at ? And I'm no Jew—
More like a Jew yourself with thon hooked neb.

NEBBY. Better a half-moon than a button-mushroom,
If we're for swapping compliments on noses.
And Jews—well, they're not mongrels, anyhow—
They're all pure bred : and devil only kens
What boggart got you on a worn-out besom—

Born upon Guy Fawkes Day and all, I'd fancy.
But, whether or no, I'm going to squat right here.

(NEBBY *sits down under Winter's Stob. The sheep spread out, and start grazing on either side of the road.*)

CURLY (*looking up at the Stob*). Thon's a queer signpost, with
no word upon it,

And pointing down no road.

NEBBY. It's pointing straight

The road you're travelling hotfoot, son.

CURLY. What road ?

NEBBY. The road to hell.

CURLY. To hell yourself !

NEBBY. If you

Don't sprag that tongue, you'll find it's taken you

The journey at a jump. But sure enough

It's a queer signpost, and it's called a stob.

CURLY. A stob—what's that ?

NEBBY. A gibbet, son.

CURLY. A gibbet ?

NEBBY. Where ever were you reared and educated,

That you don't ken a gibbet when you see one ?

Next you'll be kidding me you never heard

Of William Winter.

CURLY. Well, I never did.

NEBBY. The ignorance of young folk nowadays !

He was a murderer, and dangled there

In chains until the corbies picked his bones

Clean as a whistle for the wind to blow through.

CURLY. Who did he murder ?

NEBBY. Old Peggy of Haws Pele,

Down in the bottom yonder.

CURLY. They hanged him here ?

NEBBY. Hanged ! Carties, you don't ken the difference

Betwixt a gibbet and a gallows ! Well,

I'm mistaken in you : it's the other place

You're ticketed for—Old Nick's got little use

For ignoramuses. They strung him up

With his two doxies at Newcastle gaol :

Then, judging he'd a liking for the spot

Where the three of them had done the gallant deed

Of strangling one old woman for her stocking . . .

CURLY. Her stocking ?

NEBBY. Ay, the one beneath the mattress
 She kept her golden leg in—they carted out
 His carcase here, and hoisted it in chains
 Where his dead eyes could look down on Haws Pele,
 Till his bones dropped from their hinges, and only his skull
 Glowered on it with eyeless sockets ; and then they gathered
 His bones into a sack ; and they hung rattling
 Until the rain had rotted it to shreds.

CURLY. A bloody story.

NEBBY. It should be a warning
 To the likes of you not to wear heelplates, son.

CURLY. Heelplates ?

NEBBY. Ay, 'twas his heelplates did for him.
 The day before, he'd squatted by the road
 With his two doxies, as you're doing now
 With hoofs stuck out for all the world to see ;
 And a passing herd-lad with an eye in his head
 Noted the pretty pattern of his heelplates ;
 And when they found the snow about Haws Pele
 Printed with the same pattern, William Winter
 Was done for—corpse-cold as his name already,
 Though little guessing it himself where he
 Was swilling old Peg's savings with his wenches.

CURLY. To think his heelplates . . .

NEBBY. Likely enough they were
 The very pattern of your own. Since then
 It's only innocents and wattikins
 Have sported heelplates. You've left a lovely print
 Of yours in every patch of clarts we've crossed
 Since we quitted Morpeth.

CURLY. Strike me blue ! By gox !

(He takes out his jack-knife and begins hacking off his heel-plates.)

NEBBY. Too late to hack them off—though likely enough
 The trotters have saved you ; it's well you went before :
 'Twould take a sharp-eyed 'tec to pick out footprints
 When five-score ewes have paddled over them.
 But let it be a lesson to you, son.
 You thought yourself so swanky with braw heelplates ;
 And Winter turned his up for all to see,
 And he was taken by the heels. It's swagger
 That's many a man's undoing ; and some day . . .

CURLY. But I'm no murderer.

NEBBY. Nor any lad
Till he's done murder. Thon's a hefty gully
You carry in your pocket—just the blade
To slit a weasand or tickle a man's ribs.

CURLY. What is't your getting at ?

NEBBY. Just this, my son :
We mayn't all carry murder in our pockets,
But all of us have got it in our hearts ;
And some folk shouldn't trust themselves with knives.
I'd an eye on you, my lad, when Spanker Ord
Linked arms and walked off with your wench last night.

CURLY. I'll settle with Spanker yet !

NEBBY. Just so—just so !
You'd have done the trick last night if he'd not been
Just twice your size ; and one day you'll chance on him
In a dark lane or sleeping in a ditch ;
And then it won't be hacking off your heelplates
Will save you from Newcastle—and all for what ?
A wench who'll link up with another lad
Because he's got it over you in inches
Or wears a gaudier neckerchief : it's such
Bring most men to the gallows—they're the heelplates
Lads sport so swankily to their undoing.
Even if William Winter'd gone scot-free
That time, he couldn't have escaped the hangman.
What other end could any man expect
Who travels with two doxies ? Ay, my son,
You judge you ken all there's to know of women,
As I did at your age ; but mark my words,
No man is safe till he knows all—and more :
And I'm still learning at three-score-and-ten.
If you don't keep that jack-knife clasped, and clean
For cutting bread and cheese—that's what it's for—
Not cutting out folk's livers . . .

CURLY. And who said
I wanted to cut out any one's ?

NEBBY. You said it—
Not with your tongue : but you've a pair of eyes
Are tell-tale-tits : and they'd be evidence
Enough to damn you to the blindest bats

That ever crammed a jury-box. You've got
 A speaking countenance, as they call it, son—
 Ay, and that flush ! Best keep that fire damped down,
 My fighting-cock, if you'd not kindle hell—
 Or anyway until you meet the woman
 Who'll teach you, son, all women folk aren't strumpets :
 And she'll not rouse the murder in your heart.
 I learnt that early, just about your age ;
 And that's why I have reached three-score-and ten.
 You follow the draggle-tails of that young fizgig,
 You'll hang for her ; but leave her to six-foot-three,
 And 'twill be Spanker kicks his heels in air
 For doing in her latest fancy-man,
 Who'll happen wear brass ear-rings, or sport a waistcoat
 With pearlie buttons—I've known scarlet braces
 Tempt that sort to go tramping with a tinker.
 Son, I was sitting on this very spot
 A year back, when I heard a hubblyshew
 Far overhead ; and, squinting up, I saw
 Two sparrowhawks at grips, with feathers flying
 And claws locked in each other's breasts. Thinks I
 So that's the game ; and looked out for the hen :
 And sure enough I spotted her on yon crag
 Looking on calm as calm—when another cock,
 Scenting the battle likely, swaggered up ;
 And off she sailed with him as the fighters dropped,
 One dead, the other with a broken wing.
 If you and Spanker ever come to grips,
 I've a shrewd notion which will fare the worse :
 And sure as fate the better man will find
 The best has bagged his bird while he's been scrapping.
 Yet women folk aren't all hawks ; and I'd the luck
 To learn that early. But I'm wasting wind.
 What a lad's to learn of women he can learn
 Only from women, and you've had a lesson
 From one sort . . . (*As CURLY springs suddenly to his feet*)

What the devil are you up to ?

CURLY (*looking down the road*). Spanker, by gox !

NEBBY. Spanker it is, no less.

Just hand me out that gully, Curly lad.

CURLY. I'm damned . . .

NEBBY. That's so, if you're forgetting Winter.

(*CURLY takes the knife from his pocket and tosses it to NEBBY without a word.*)

NEBBY (*pocketing the knife*). That's that : and now you squat.

It's not polite,

And, what's more to the purpose, none too safe,
To stand there gaping when a gentleman
Like Spanker's walking with his doxy.

CURLY (*sitting down*). Nay,
There's no one with him.

NEBBY. Well, my eyes are not
The eyes they were. And so he walks alone ?
Ay, now I see ; and, judging from his looks,
You might have kept your knife.

CURLY. We'd best be moving.

NEBBY. Nay, till we know, you're safer on your hunkers :
And what's your hurry, just when there's a chance
Of pleasant company ? You're well enough
For common days, but then to-day's my birthday—
Just seventy year to-day since I first opened
This mug to give my mammy some advice ;
And I'm still wasting good advice on you :
And I've been used to parties on my birthday.
I'm fond of company—I ken they say
"Three's none" : but that depends ; and for my part
I've always found three makes things livelier ;
Though happen it's a stretch to talk of Spanker
As company, outside a coffin-shop—
Lord, what an undertaker there was lost
When hangdog took to droving ! Not the crony
I'd choose maybe ; but on the road you've got
Just to put up with aught that comes along :
Ay, and not only on the road—the world's
A lodging-house that takes all sorts of lodgers ;
And even in the doss-house in the basement
We'll not be able to pick our company.

(*SPANKER ORD draws near—a lanky dour-looking man.
He is walking with his head down, and doesn't see NEBBY
and CURLY as he strides by.*)

NEBBY. Hi, Spanker ! What's your hurry ? Who is dying
Just for one glimpse of thon bright smile of yours ?

SPANKER (*stopping and turning round*). You, is it ?

NEBBY. Ay. You took it for the voice
Of Winter's ghost ?

SPANKER (*seeing* CURLY). And you !

NEBBY. Ay, Curly's with me
This journey. He it was who kenned you first.
I couldn't make out what it was that sparkled
Along the road just like a looking-glass,
If looking-glasses could go gallivanting,
When Curly says—" It's Spanker ! " and I said—
" Spanker it is, and bless his sunny smile."

SPANKER. You hold your gob.

NEBBY. It's yours that wants the holding,
By the looks of it : but if you've got the toothache,
You've come to the right shop—a splinter of wood
From Winter's Stob is warranted to cure . . .

SPANKER. Toothache be damned !

NEBBY. I'm with you there, my friend.
The things I've suffered from my teeth—the fuss
They made, coming and going—couldn't stay
To see me through, they couldn't. But Spanker, boy,
Where is your lady friend ?

SPANKER. My lady friend ?

NEBBY. Thon wench . . .

SPANKER. Damn all . . .

NEBBY. Nay, now you go too far.
Damn anything in reason, and I'm with you :
But all . . . Why, mate, where ever should we be
Without the ladies ? And you didn't seem
Last night to be . . . You've not deserted her,
Thon blue-eyed lass—and she without a mammy ?
Shame on you, Spanker : I'd thought better of you !
How you've the heart to leave that innocent
To cry her eyes out for . . .

SPANKER. Deserted her !

She—crying for me !

NEBBY. Who wouldn't ?

SPANKER. Gox, she'll cry

Before I've done with her ! (*Turns to go.*)

NEBBY. Where are you off to ?

SPANKER. After her.

NEBBY. What, she's left you ?

SPANKER. Ay, she's left me.

NEBBY. Now how can I believe that ?

SPANKER.

It's God's truth—

Left me this morning for a bloody mugger.

NEBBY. A mugger ? Nay—now if you'd said a marquis I might have . . .

SPANKER. Sloped off with him in his cart
While I was sleeping : but I'm on their track.

NEBBY. So ho, my sleuth-hound, nosing on the scent !
Brass ear-rings and a pair of scarlet braces,
I'll warrant ! Hard it is a handsome man
Like you can't hold them without titivating :
But that's the way with women—got to wash
To humour them even if you are a duke.
So they eloped, and you are following them—
That's why you're travelling without sheep ? A man
Looks such a fool without a flock before him.
You're tracking them ? You don't by any chance
Wear heelplates, Spanker ?

SPANKER. Heelplates ? What the devil . . .
You're going dotty—and I'll go dotty too . . .

NEBBY. Not far for you to travel.

SPANKER. . . . if I stand here
Chin-wagging ; and I'll lose the track of them.

[SPANKER *sets off running*.]

NEBBY. And never even wished me "happy returns"—
Though likely it's I should have been wishing him . . .
Toothache ! It's not a splinter from a gibbet
Will cure his ache, but the gallows rope itself.
Yet I can't argue with every looney that's set
On running his head in a noose—and anyway,
With jobs so scarce, it isn't fair to the hangman :
He's got his brats to keep in bread and butter.
We'd best be moving too.

CURLY (*rising*). Give me my gully.

NEBBY (*getting up with difficulty*).
Ow ! growing pains ! Give you . . . I'm not aware
I've anything of yours about me, son.

CURLY. You thief, you !

NEBBY. Oh, you mean the knife you swapt
For my advice ? You'll never get that back,
Until you've given me advice as useful
And saved my neck. I'm no philanthropist :

When I want naught, I give as much, no more.
My eye's been on thon jack-knife since I lost
My own last night ; and it should serve to cut
My bread and cheese till the day I lose my relish
For them and beer—and so know I'm in hell.
Yet you may have it back on one condition—
If you will follow Spanker and plant it deep
Betwixt his shoulder-blades . . . You won't ? Well, well,
It doesn't seem you set much value on it
If you'll not do a little thing like that
To get it back. We'd best be stepping out :
And, as you've done with them, I may as tite
Pocket thon heelplates : they might fetch a penny.
One thing I can't abide—that's wilful waste.

KESTREL EDGE

PERSONS

REUBEN ANGERTON, *a young sheep-master.*

GIDEON ANGERTON, *his younger brother.*

NAOMI ANGERTON, *their mother.*

SCENE I

SCENE.—*The parlour of Kestrel Edge, the farmstead of a big sheep-farm on the Border. It is about half-past seven on a November evening and the table is laid for supper. NAOMI ANGERTON, a widow of forty-five, sits with her knitting in her hand, now gazing abstractedly into the fire, now glancing restlessly at the clock. Supper is laid for two. Presently a sound of wheels is heard without. NAOMI listens but does not rise: and before long REUBEN ANGERTON, a strapping young well-to-do sheep-master of twenty-five, enters, unbuttoning his greatcoat which he throws carelessly over a chair. He strides to the hearth, and stands with his back to the fire, his hands behind him, warming them.*

REUBEN. A raw night, mother.

NAOMI.

You're back?

REUBEN.

And glad to be so.

The wind's a perisher. I might have come
Straight from New Zealand—I'm such frozen mutton—
Could scarcely hold the reins. It's going to snow.

NAOMI. And what's the news?

REUBEN.

The news?—that Kestrel Edge

Has lost the best tup ever bred there,

NAOMI.

Sheep!

I ask for news, and hear you've lost a sheep.

But happen you've found something will make up?

When you set out to sell a ram, you don't

Expect to bring him back.

REUBEN. Make up for him ?
Nothing could make up for a tup like thon.

NAOMI. Not even gold?

REUBEN. Nay, not his weight in gold.

NAOMI. And what would that be?

REUBEN. Somewhere around ten stone.

NAOMI. And how far short's the price?

REUBEN. I hardly know

What it would turn the scale at, paid in sovereigns ;

But it's gey light in notes, not half an ounce.

NAOMI. How many notes?

REUBEN. Five notes.

NAOMI. Five hundreds?

REUBEN. Ay.

NAOMI. That's naught to grumble at—a tidy sum.

REUBEN. I could have had it twice over for two such tups :

There were two agents bidding against each other

For Kestrel King.

NAOMI. Pity you hadn't two.

REUBEN. Two, mother? There has never been a tup
The like of him.

NAOMI. Havers ! You know my father

Got twice the sum for Border Chief.

REUBEN. That's so :

Thon were the golden days for breeding sheep.

But Kestrel . . .

NAOMI. Oh, I'm sick to death of sheep!

It's always tups and ewes and ewes and tups,

Cheviots and Southdowns, Hedderwicks and Leicesters.

Till I'm sheep-witted with the bleat of men.

Best take your supper.

REUBEN (*seating himself at the table*). Just two places?

NAOMI. Ay.

I took tea late ; and couldn't touch a bite.

REUBEN. Where's Gideon?

NAOMI. How should I know? Like enough.

Looking for lost sheep—he's sheep-watty too,

Like all the Angertons.

REUBEN. Gideon? He hardly kens

A Border-Leicester from a Hedderwick.

NAOMI. But he's an eye for black sheep.

REUBEN.

True enough—

Reclaiming them and all—takes after father.

NAOMI. He's half your father : you're the other half.

REUBEN. Ay, father was sheep-master of two flocks.

NAOMI. Yet, souls or mutton, it was always sheep.

But, all the same, I'm glad you've got that price
Just now.

REUBEN. Just now ? We're nothing short of cash.

NAOMI. I'm glad you've got your father's gift with sheep ;
And Kestrel Edge will prosper. Gideon's flock
Of blood-washed sinners wouldn't fetch one-half—
One-hundredth.

REUBEN. Mocker, they're beyond all price.

NAOMI. They should be, from the looks of them—pure gold
Inside, I fancy, instead of flesh and blood.
But I've a notion Gideon's heart just now
Is not so set on rescuing black sheep
As spoiling John Hall of his one ewe-lamb.

REUBEN. What, Hetty ?

NAOMI. Ay, and your heart too should be,
At your age, Reuben . . .

REUBEN. Coveting ewe-lambs ?
I've flocks enough.

NAOMI. Ay, sheep and sheep and sheep !
Time you were wedded : I'd have gone . . . (*Breaks off.*)

REUBEN. Gone where ?
You're not . . .

NAOMI. What am I saying ? I only mean
That I'd feel easier with you settled down.

REUBEN. Easier ? Why should you be uneasy ?

NAOMI. Well,
You always were my favourite, and I feel,
If anything should happen . . . (*Breaks off.*)

REUBEN. What should happen ?

NAOMI. Things happen suddenly.

REUBEN. Ay . . . ay, you mean
Like father's death.

NAOMI. I wasn't meaning that.

REUBEN. I'm sorry, mother : if I'd taken thought,
I'd not have mentioned . . .

NAOMI. And why shouldn't you mention
Your father's death ?

REUBEN. Well, it's not good to think of.

NAOMI. You're always thinking of it—and you brood ;
And brooding's apt to hatch out evil thoughts.
Every one knows it was . . . The jury found . . . (*Breaks off.*)

REUBEN. The jury brought it in an accident.

NAOMI. And he died suddenly, likely knowing nothing—
An easier death than many at his age
Might look for. I'd far rather die like that
Than linger.

REUBEN. Ay—but cut off in his prime.

NAOMI. His prime—at seventy ? But you're right enough :
The Angertons ripen slowly—only reach
Their prime when they're about three-score-and-ten.

REUBEN. Ay, oaks that bear no acorns till they're sixty.

NAOMI. And they're still hale and hearty men at ninety.
But I'm no Angerton. I've no time to spare :
The Kales are not long-lived.

REUBEN. At forty-five
Your thoughts are turning to the graveyard ?

NAOMI. Nay,
Not to the graveyard yet ; but if I live
Till seventy, two-thirds of life are gone ;
And I've not yet begun . . . (*Breaks off.*)

REUBEN. Not yet begun ?

NAOMI. You wouldn't understand. And I've a deal
To sort upstairs before I go to bed.

REUBEN. A deal to sort at this hour ? That's not like
you.

NAOMI. Not like the me you know. Yet I've a sight
Of things to settle. I'll have no time to-morrow.
But I'll slip down again at ten o'clock
To bid you both good-night. Likely by then
Your brother will be back—I know the Halls
Keep early hours, and hungry from his courting.
They talk of lovers fasting, but no lass
Has ever spoilt an Angerton's appetite ;
And even the loss of Kestrel King doesn't seem
To spoil your relish for your food.

REUBEN. That's so—
I'm doing well ; that raw wind's put an edge
On my appetite : and yet I don't much like
Thinking of thon poor sheep crossing the waves.

NAOMI. True Angerton, fretting for a sea-sick sheep !
Where was it bound for—Canada ?

REUBEN. Nay, mother,
For South America. Whatever put
Canada into your head ?

NAOMI. Dear knows ! but I
Can't stay here chattering of sheep till midnight :
I've something else to do and think of.

REUBEN. Well,
If only folk would keep their tongues to sheep—
Ay, and their hearts from mischief, it would be . . .

NAOMI. A blessed world !

[NAOMI goes out, shutting the door behind her.

REUBEN. And it's the devil's own.

(REUBEN turns from the table and sits brooding over the
fire. After a while the door bursts open and GIDEON
ANGERTON enters hurriedly, shutting it behind him, and
sinks into a chair with a groan and sits with his head in
his hands.)

REUBEN. What's up ? Don't tell me the ewe-lamb won't . . .

GIDEON. Lamb ?

REUBEN. Ay, Hetty.

GIDEON. Hetty—oh, don't talk of her !

REUBEN. As bad as that ? What's wrong ?

GIDEON. What's wrong ? What's wrong ?

The devil has the whole world in his grip.

REUBEN. Just what I said.

GIDEON. You ?

REUBEN. Though not so familiar
With Nick as some, mayn't I just mention him
Once in a while—or have you local preachers
The only right to make free with his name ?
But what's upset you now ? Don't say a shower's
Sluiced off the whitewash from your precious flock
And left them patchy piebalds ?

GIDEON. You can flee—
And father lying . . .

REUBEN. Father's in his grave.

GIDEON. His blood is crying for vengeance from the ground.

REUBEN. Gideon !

GIDEON. Oh, you don't know ! Oh, you don't know !

REUBEN. Whisht, Gideon, not so loud—remember mother.

GIDEON. Where is she ?

REUBEN. In her room.

GIDEON. She couldn't hear—

Though soon she must hear : all the world must hear . . .

REUBEN. Where have you been ?

GIDEON. With Zachariah Dodd.

REUBEN. So . . . and what bitters does old Zachariah
Keep nowadays to wet his whistle with ?

GIDEON. And you can jest ? But you don't know. O God !

REUBEN. What don't I know ? What's he been telling you ?

GIDEON. Reuben, I can't tell how to break it to you.

REUBEN. Let it burst out itself, if it must come.

So he's been telling you . . . ?

GIDEON. How father died.

He saw it all. It was no accident—

It wasn't his own gun that did for him,

Though everybody thought he'd caught the trigger,

Crossing the fence. 'Twas Robert Ellershaw

Crouched in the ditch, and shot him through the hedge.

REUBEN. And you believe what that old dotard says ?

GIDEON. He spoke the truth—he swore it on the Book.

REUBEN. Yet he said nothing at the inquest ?

GIDEON. Nay—

I couldn't understand . . .

REUBEN. He didn't tell you

Why he had held his peace ?

GIDEON. He mumbled something

I didn't catch—and I was too distraught . . .

REUBEN. Why did he tell you after all these months ?

GIDEON. He said that he'd lost patience.

REUBEN. He said that ?

GIDEON. I wondered why he did not tell you first.

Happen he judged I'd better break it to you—

You might do something desperate. But you don't—

Don't seem to realise, somehow—and yet

Small wonder ! I was struck all of a heap

At first, and couldn't move.

REUBEN. It's come at last.

GIDEON. It's come . . . You do not mean you knew ?

REUBEN. I knew.

GIDEON. You knew, and never . . . O my God ! My God !

REUBEN. I knew before the inquest.

GIDEON.

And you let . . .

REUBEN. I let them bring it in an accident.

GIDEON. But Zachariah ?

REUBEN. I shut Zachy's mouth

With sovereigns and with promises.

GIDEON.

But why ?

REUBEN. I wanted time to think—to think it out.

GIDEON. To think it out ?—your duty plain before you
To see the murderer hanged ?

REUBEN.

Ay, it seemed plain

At first.

GIDEON. Then why . . .

REUBEN.

When I began to think,

It wasn't quite so plain. You see . . .

GIDEON.

Not I.

Duty is duty.

REUBEN. Ay, but there was mother.

GIDEON. I don't see why . . .

REUBEN.

You wouldn't.

GIDEON.

Well, I don't.

The shock, of course—but then she'd had the shock

Of father's death already : and, even then,

You cannot let a murderer escape

Just to spare people's feelings.

REUBEN.

So it seems :

But mother . . .

GIDEON. You don't mean that mother knew !

REUBEN. Nay, God forbid ! It was an accident

As far as mother knew. How could she guess,

When I'd stopped Zachariah's mouth with gold ?

GIDEON. And promises—what promises ?

REUBEN.

Of vengeance.

GIDEON. Vengeance—when there's the law ?

REUBEN.

I said I'd take

The law in my own hands.

GIDEON.

You never meant . . .

REUBEN. I hardly know—I had to keep him quiet
At any cost.

GIDEON. But why ?

REUBEN.

To think it out.

GIDEON. I don't see . . .

REUBEN.

There was mother.

GIDEON.

Always mother !

Reuben, you never mean . . .

REUBEN.

I only mean,

If Robert Ellershaw were tried and hanged

For father's murder, there'd be talk.

GIDEON.

My God !

Talk ! And you'd let a murderer go scot-free

For fear of tattle ? What have we to fear ?

Justice is justice—and what have you gained ?

Murder will out ; and Zachariah's blabbed,

And there'll be talk enough now.

REUBEN.

So it seems.

GIDEON. I still don't understand.

REUBEN.

It's difficult—

And I hardly know if I've a right to say it,

But Gideon, Robert Ellershaw and mother

Are just about of an age.

GIDEON.

Reuben !

REUBEN.

And father

Was twenty-five years older : and you know

Father was hard.

GIDEON.

A just, God-fearing man.

REUBEN. Ay, just, but hard. You never heard him speak

A kindly word to mother in your life.

GIDEON. Happen—but that's no reason . . .

REUBEN.

Nay, God knows !

No reason, but . . . Oh, if I only knew !

GIDEON. You knew the murderer. And you don't think
mother . . .

REUBEN. God knows I think no harm of her ; but, Gideon,

It's long been plain who Robert Ellershaw

Had set his heart on—why he never wed.

GIDEON. You think . . . I never saw . . .

REUBEN.

You never saw—

But other folk have eyes : and if I'd let

Old Zachariah talk, no power on earth

Could have kept mother's name out.

GIDEON.

You forgot

Your duty to the dead.

REUBEN.

The dead are dead :

Our duty cannot save them—bring them back.

That, if we didn't, he would speak out now.
 He said he wouldn't sell his soul for gold :
 I didn't understand him—now I see.
 He is an old man, Reuben, and nigh death,
 And dreads the fires of hell. You promised him ;
 And you've not kept your promise. You'd not let
 An old man go to hell, to stop folk tattling ?
 He said it all came over him at Meeting
 When I was speaking.

REUBEN. This comes of your ranting ?
 You dangled him above the fiery pit ?

GIDEON. I preach the word of God : I'm but the mouth
 God speaks through : and he saw that gold was dross—
 He couldn't take it with him to the next world.

REUBEN. And, if he could, 'twould melt and burn his breeches ?

GIDEON. You jest at such a time ?

REUBEN. What's left to me
 But jesting ? And, God knows, the laugh's against me.

GIDEON. You promised Zachariah you would act.

REUBEN. I promised him.

GIDEON. Reuben, you lied to him
 That you might shirk your duty ; and you damned
 His soul to everlasting. But it's not
 For his sake I would speak, nor for my own—
 Though I've my soul to save and his and yours
 From the undying fire. I couldn't rest
 With father murdered. Don't you hear his blood
 Crying for vengeance ? And the word of God—
 An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth . . .

REUBEN. It's come.
 I'll keep my word.

GIDEON. You'll speak ?

REUBEN. Nay, it's too late
 To speak, but I must keep my promise.

GIDEON. Reuben !

REUBEN. I said I'd take the law into my hands.

GIDEON. You mean . . .

REUBEN. I mean a man has killed my father,
 And he must die.

GIDEON. You mean . . . But there's the law.

REUBEN. The time's gone by for that—and anyway
 If he's to die, why should I thrust the job

Of killing my father's murderer on the shoulders
Of some one else ?

GIDEON. But it's the law.

REUBEN. Whose law ?

GIDEON. But, Reuben, you would send your soul to hell.

REUBEN. My soul has been in hell for these twelve months.

GIDEON. Ay—it may be the way that God appoints
For your redemption.

REUBEN. It's the way to spare
My mother. Folk will talk—but they'll not know.
There'll be no trial, no cross-questioning.

GIDEON. No trial—you mean you'd take your own life too ?
Reuben, it's terrible—I cannot bear . . .
But it may be God's way to save your soul
Alive. God moves in a mysterious way
His wonders to perform. We cannot see—
Blinded by sin we stumble. Yet He spake
To Zachariah's heart through me—and now
My words have roused you.

REUBEN. There's no other way.

(REUBEN goes to the gun-rack over the mantelshelf, takes
down a gun and opens it to make sure it is loaded ; then
moves towards the door, but turns on the threshold.)

REUBEN. Gideon, you'll say " Good-bye " for me ?

[He goes out, closing the door behind him.]

GIDEON. Nay, Reuben,
You shall not ! Yet, God's will . . . He spake through me.
God moves in a mysterious way. My words
Have roused the sinner's . . . O my God, have mercy !
(GIDEON drops to his knees with a moan.)

SCENE II

SCENE.—*The same, an hour later.* GIDEON ANGERTON still
crouches on his knees with his hands clasped as though in
prayer, but is staring before him with half-crazed eyes. The
door opens and REUBEN ANGERTON enters quietly, shutting
the door behind him, and sets the gun in the corner of the room
nearest the door. GIDEON turns and regards him in amaze-
ment. REUBEN does not heed him, but sinks into a chair
without a word and sits gazing into the fire.

GIDEON. You have come back ?

REUBEN. I have come back.

GIDEON. I thought . . .

You've done it, Reuben ?

REUBEN. Nay, Gideon, I've done nothing.

GIDEON. Nothing ?

REUBEN. I couldn't.

GIDEON. You have shirked again ?

REUBEN. I've shirked.

GIDEON. But where've you been ?

REUBEN. To Burnshawgate.

GIDEON. And you've come back without . . . He's still alive ?

REUBEN. He's still alive. I went to Burnshawgate :

The snow was in my face—it's snowing now :

I knew 'twould snow to-night with that raw wind . . .

GIDEON. And you can talk of snow ! Have you gone crazed ?

REUBEN. Happen—it's hard to tell ; but I don't fancy

I'm crazy now.

GIDEON. You went to Burnshawgate—

And then ?

REUBEN. As I drew near it through the snow—

The snow blew in my teeth and stung my face . . .

GIDEON. My God ! Speak out, speak out ! As you drew near ?

REUBEN. I saw the parlour window lighted up :

It looked so homely . . .

GIDEON. God's destroyed your wits.

REUBEN. Nay, Gideon, hear me out. The blinds were up,

And, as I paused a moment on the threshold,

I saw into the room. It looked so warm

And bright and cosy there, out of the wind—

So safe—and I, out in the wind and snow

With cold death in my hand.

GIDEON. The curse of God

Is on you.

REUBEN. Nay, you'll never understand :

But hear me out ; I haven't much to tell.

I looked, and saw him standing by the fire,

Unconscious, while . . .

GIDEON. Alone ? Oh, Reuben, say

He was alone ! Mother's upstairs—you're sure ?

REUBEN. You dare to think that she . . . He was alone,

And gazing into the fire with smiling eyes :

And, as I watched him there, it seemed so crazy—
 First father, standing upright in his pride,
 And Robert, creeping up to lay him low ;
 Then Robert, standing upright in his pride
 Of life, and I . . . when in a few short years
 We'll all be lying low enough without . . .

GIDEON. You saw him standing—and you did not fire ?

REUBEN. My God, you never thought I meant to do it
 Without his knowing ? You fancied I'd sneak up
 To a man's house and shoot him from behind ?

GIDEON. Well, I don't understand—but you've not done it,
 Whatever you meant to do.

REUBEN. I haven't done it.
 I couldn't call him out somehow : it seemed
 So crazy—he and I should stand out there,
 Facing each other in the falling snow,
 That one might stretch the other stiff and stark,
 When anyway . . . And that could never end it.
 If I had fallen . . .

GIDEON. So you were afraid ?

REUBEN. Hardly afraid—but, if I'd fallen, Robert
 Could scarcely have escaped a second time ;
 And . . .

GIDEON. Nay, by God !

REUBEN. And mother would be spared
 Nothing.

GIDEON. God would have sped the bullet straight
 To the scoundrel's heart—but you have failed God twice.

REUBEN. I'm not so sure that God . . .

GIDEON. His curse is on you :
 But I'm His servant, and I'm not afraid.

REUBEN. Nay, Gideon, listen : God . . .

GIDEON. I will not hearken
 While you blaspheme. You've always been a mocker ;
 And it's the tempter, speaking through your mouth.
 You've let him make his nest within your heart—
 The old serpent, and it's his, the tongue that speaks.
 But woe to them that take His name in vain !
 And God shall bruise the serpent's head : my heel . . .

REUBEN. Nay, Gideon, listen : it is not for men
 To punish such as Robert.

GIDEON. But God makes

Of man His instrument of wrath. You'd let
The murderer escape ?

REUBEN. I'd let him go
Where he is bound for—but he can't escape
From his own deed : trust God to see to that.

GIDEON. You'd let him go ?

REUBEN. Why not, if Zachariah
Was right, and Ellershaw is set on flitting ?

GIDEON. Never ! He shan't escape—and anyway
You've Zachariah still to reckon with.

REUBEN. I'll talk with him to-morrow. With Robert gone,
The old man may be silenced. He'll never guess
That Ellershaw could be brought back again.
I'll find a way to stop his mouth : he's failing—
'Twont be for long.

GIDEON. You may bribe Zachariah
To silence—but you can't buy God with gold,
Or blind Him with the smoke of your burnt-offerings—
They are abomination in His nostrils.
He is a jealous God, and overturns
The altars of the infidel, and quenches
The fires of Baal and of Ashtoreth :
And I'm His servant, and you cannot stop
My mouth . . .

REUBEN. But, Gideon, you would never speak,
After I've told you . . .

GIDEON. Robert Ellershaw
Shall pay the price—his blood be on his head.

REUBEN. Hush, Gideon—mother !

*(The door opens and NAOMI ANGERTON enters. Neither
REUBEN nor GIDEON looks up, but both stand with eyes
fixed on the fire.)*

NAOMI. You're not quarrelling ?
I thought I heard . . .

REUBEN. Nay, we're not quarrelling.

NAOMI. That's well ; for I'd not have you quarrel to-night.

REUBEN. To-night ?

NAOMI. My last night here : I leave to-morrow.

REUBEN. You leave ?

NAOMI. I'm leaving Kestrel Edge to-morrow
For Canada.

GIDEON. With Robert Ellershaw ?

NAOMI (*starting*). How did you guess ?

GIDEON. O God, and so my mother's
A murderer's . . .

REUBEN (*clapping a hand to GIDEON'S mouth*). Nay ! none of
your Bible talk.

You shall not turn your preacher's dirty tongue
On your own mother. (*To NAOMI*) Come, you'd best sit down—
You're faint.

NAOMI (*sinking into a seat and speaking with a dazed voice*).

But why does he say "murderer" ?

The coroner's jury found . . . the whole world knows . . .

GIDEON. And the whole world shall know it for a lie.

It was no accident : your fancy-man . . .

REUBEN. Gideon !

GIDEON. I'll not be hushed. Your fancy-man
Slunk down behind the hedge and shot your husband.

NAOMI. You lie—they fought !

REUBEN. Mother ! You didn't know
Ellershaw'd killed . . .

NAOMI. Reuben, my son, I knew ;
And I'll speak out the truth, think what you will.
You cannot judge till you've come through what I have,

Though happen, Reuben, you may understand.

He told me all—though from the first I knew :

I never thought it was an accident :

He would have spared me, but I made him tell :

I wrung it out of him. They fought for me.

REUBEN. For you ?

NAOMI. As many a time two men have fought
For a woman's sake. You cannot understand—
You're boys and don't know what it is to love.

GIDEON. He told you that ?

NAOMI. I wrung it out of him.
He only told me when he found I knew
It was no accident—he tried to spare me.

They fought for me : he heard your father's gun,

And took his own and went right up to him

Where he was rabbiting, and challenged him :

And then they fought like men : your father fell,

And Robert . . .

GIDEON. Sneaked into his . . .

REUBEN. Hold your peace !

Mother, he lied to you. He lay in wait
And murdered father—shot him through the hedge.

NAOMI (*starting up*). Nay, it's not true !

REUBEN. Mother, I fear it's true ;

For he was seen.

NAOMI. Seen ? I don't understand—

Who saw ?

REUBEN. Old Zachariah Dodd.

NAOMI. He saw—

And never told ?—the inquest . . .

REUBEN. I had stopped

His mouth . . .

NAOMI. You knew, and never said a word ?

REUBEN. How could I guess you knew Robert had killed . . .

GIDEON. She knew her paramour had killed her husband—

And she would fly with him.

REUBEN (*to GIDEON*). Another word,

And I'll . . .

NOAMI (*to REUBEN*). Still, though you thought I didn't know,

Why did you hush it up ?

REUBEN. I hoped to spare you :

I knew that Robert . . .

NAOMI. Oh, it's all a lie !

They fought—they fought !

REUBEN. Mother, I fear it's true.

NAOMI. I wrung it out . . . Oh, Reuben, you'll believe me ?

How could I dream Robert had murdered him

Cold-blooded ? And I'll not believe it now !

Yet I'd to wring it word by word from him.

I thought he tried to spare me. Now I see.

GIDEON. 'Twas his own neck he tried to save.

NAOMI (*sinking to the ground*). O God,

What have I done !

GIDEON. You're taken in the net

Of your iniquities. God bides His time :

Yet He will not be mocked. He holds His hand—

But when it falls ! You're stricken to your knees ;

And we should all . . . But I . . . This wicked house !

God's curse is on us all, and I must go . . .

(REUBEN, *who has been bending over NAOMI, looks up.*)

REUBEN. Where are you going ?

GIDEON. To wrestle with the Lord.

REUBEN (*bending over NAOMI again*). Don't heed him, mother :
Gideon's just a lad.

NAOMI. Reuben, you understand ?

REUBEN. I hardly know.

(*NAOMI and REUBEN having their backs to him, GIDEON takes the gun from the corner unnoticed and steals out of the room. REUBEN looks up as the door closes, and listens till he hears GIDEON'S steps in the room overhead, and then the sound of his voice praying in loud tones.*)

REUBEN. He's gone to his own room. He'll spend the night
On his knees till he drops asleep : and in the morning
I'll see what I can . . .

NAOMI. God has punished me.

SCENE III

SCENE.—*The same. NAOMI is still crouched on the ground, and REUBEN, half-kneeling, bends over her. Presently NAOMI lifts her head, and begins to talk slowly with eyes fixed on the fire. There is no sound from the room overhead.*

NAOMI. No one will understand—but I must speak.
I've had a hard life of it, from the first.
I never knew my mother—never heard
What had become of her, although I think
She wasn't dead. She may be living yet,
For all I know—and she would understand !
My father never mentioned her to me :
And though I searched the churchyard for her grave
I never found it ; and I dared not ask
My father ; and I couldn't bring myself
To question others, dreading what I might learn.
That was the home I lived in till the day
My father gave me away—I had no choice :
Who'd ever listen to a chit of a girl
When it's a question of property and sheep ?
I'd happened to come into my father's mind,
Or, rather, forced myself upon his notice :
I'd asked him for some money to buy hairpins,
My first—I see his face now as he stared.
“ Hairpins ? ” he says, surprised : “ a bairn like you ! ”

A flame that searched and stabbed me and stung my blood
 To madness : and . . . I must tell out the truth—
 And even when your father died . . . Oh, you
 Will never understand !—'twas all a story,
 Two men who fought to win a woman's love,
 And I the woman ! And when I had wrung
 The truth from Robert, or what I took to be . . .
 How could I doubt him when I loved him so ?
 Son, I'm not trying to excuse myself,
 Only to make it clear . . . and I can't see—
 Blood's in my eyes now, and I cannot see,
 Although I had it all so clear just now—
 I saw it in the fire so clear. But you
 May pity me, son, if you ever love,
 If you are ever burnt up in the flame.
 Oh, I was blind with pride—I thought they'd fought
 For me ; and I was blinded by my love—
 The love I thought had come at last—my dream
 Come true—and it was all a lie ! Naught's true
 But hunger and heartache—and I'd loved the lie.
 And now what's to become of me ? He said
 He'd take me to a new world, and we'd live . . .
 I was to live—to live for the first time.
 I tried to hold him—said I couldn't go
 So soon ; but he—his word was law to me :
 I loved him more for taking his own way,
 For mastering me, breaking my will to his.
 And now I see all plain : he was afraid—
 Afraid, my man of men ! He swore he'd fought
 Fairly . . . Oh, I was blind ! He lied to me.
 Your father never lied. And I'm blind now,
 Groping in blood-red darkness. I thought to grasp
 Love—and it turns to hate within my heart.
 If only I could die—if I could die
 To-night . . . and life was to begin for me
 To-morrow ! (*Starting up*) O my God ! I had forgotten—
 He's coming here : he must be on his way.

REUBEN. He's coming here ?

NAOMI.

He was to come to see you,

When I had broken the news, soon after ten.

What can I say to him if he should come ?

How can I face . . .

REUBEN. Mother, you mustn't see him :
I'll meet him on the way, and warn him.

NAOMI. Warn him ?

REUBEN. I'll tell him all is known, and he must fly
To-night, alone.

NAOMI. Yes, he must go alone.

REUBEN. And then to-morrow I'll see Zachariah,
And stop his mouth.

NAOMI. But, Gideon, where is he ?

REUBEN. In his own room. I heard him praying there—
(*listening*)

Though now I cannot hear him. Happen he sleeps—
Yet it is queer . . . (*He looks towards the corner near the door.*)

My God ! The gun—the gun !

NAOMI. What is it, Reuben ?

REUBEN. I'd have sworn I put . . .

NAOMI. He's killing Robert !

(*As NAOMI speaks the door is burst open, and GIDEON staggers into the room with the gun in his hands, and stands before NAOMI and REUBEN with eyes of frenzied triumph.*)

GIDEON. God will not be mocked !

He sent the murderer out to meet his doom
Half-way.

REUBEN. You've shot him, Gideon ?

GIDEON. Ay, I've shot him.

I was God's servant, and He chose me out
To be His instrument of wrath.

NAOMI. O God !

And Robert now ! Where are you going, Reuben ?

REUBEN. To look to Robert : there may still be time—
He mayn't be dead.

GIDEON. He's dead—stone dead : I felt
His heart to make quite sure ; and then I dragged
His carcase to the edge of Blackmire Moss
And flung it in.

REUBEN. You dragged him through the snow—
Making a trail, and then brought back the gun ?
You're a fine murderer !

GIDEON. I, a murderer ?

I was God's instrument . . .

REUBEN. And so you took
Ellershaw's sin on yourself by murdering him ?

GIDEON. Murder ? It wasn't murder !

REUBEN. 'Twill be called
Murder when there's the price to pay.

GIDEON. The price ?
Murder ! O God, I never realised . . .
My hands are red with blood. I feel the brand
Searing my brow. Reuben, I dare not die !
You'll save me—you'll not let them take me, Reuben,
And hang me by the neck ?

REUBEN. They shall not take you.

NAOMI. He must escape before . . .

REUBEN. There's no escape
For any of us in this world now—we're trapped.
If he fled now, they'd only track him down.
We must abide our fate and face it out.

GIDEON. The rope's about my neck, and I'll drop sheer
Into the everlasting fire ! But you—
You said you'd save me !

REUBEN. They'll not take you, Gideon.
You've done no crime--'twas I who murdered Robert.

NAOMI. Reuben !

GIDEON. You mean . . .

REUBEN. 'Twas my job from the first.
If I'd not shirked it . . .

GIDEON. Nay, you shall not take . . .
And yet it was your job—the eldest son.

REUBEN. It was my job : the blood be on my head.

NAOMI. Reuben, you shall not ! God, what have I done !

REUBEN. Mother, you must keep silence now. We can't
Undo what has been done. We can but wait :
And if to-morrow bring the worst, it's I
Must go with them ; and you must speak no word.

GIDEON. Reuben, you shall not give your life for mine . . .
And yet I cannot die—I cannot die . . .
Murder ? It wasn't murder ? I was chosen
To be God's instrument of wrath—to bring
Confusion on His enemies—yea, I—
The sword of the Lord and Gideon ! It's choking me,
The halter, and I feel the flames—the flames
Of the everlasting fire ! I dare not die.

'Twas your job, Reuben—and you said you'd save me !
The devil has me in his clutch—the flames !

(He falls to the floor in a swoon.)

NAOMI. I mustn't speak ; but let you . . . and live on ?

REUBEN. Mother, you'll promise—the last thing I ask you ?

NAOMI. I promise, son.

REUBEN. And, mother, you'll not take . . .

NAOMI. Nay, I will live life out—my punishment,
To live life out. I may last twenty years.

I boasted I'd begin to live to-morrow—
And my new life begins. I'll see it through,
My new life—and I've only done to death
My husband and my lover and my son !

REUBEN. You must look after Gideon—he's only swooned.
Better not rouse him now : he'll come to himself
Only too soon, poor lad. You take his shoulders :
We'll carry him up and lay him on his bed.
Then you should go to bed. We must all sleep
To-night.

NAOMI. Sleep, son !

REUBEN. I shall sleep sound to-night.

To-morrow, mother . . .

NAOMI. Son, I know love now.

(REUBEN and NAOMI lift up the unconscious GIDEON and bear him from the room, and upstairs to the room overhead. Presently REUBEN steals back quietly alone. He picks up the gun and examines it.)

REUBEN. One cartridge left. I'd better have another
To make quite sure. I ought to fire two shots—
One barrel for each. Some one might hear the gun,
And count—and wonder. I must take no risks.

(REUBEN goes to a cupboard, takes a cartridge from a box and fits it into the breech of the gun ; then stands a moment, gazing into the fire.)

REUBEN. Blackmire, he said. Something to do, at last.

[He turns and steals out of the room, and out of the house.]

I HEARD A SAILOR
AND OTHER POEMS
(1925)

TO
JOCELYN

OTHERS

LUCK

*WHAT bring you, sailor, home from the sea—
Coffers of gold and of ivory ?*

When first I went to sea as a lad
A new jack-knife was all I had :

And I've sailed for fifty years and three
To the coasts of gold and of ivory :

And now at the end of a lucky life,
Well, still I've got my old jack-knife.

THE ANNIVERSARY

THE clicking of the latch,
Then the scratch
Of a match
In the darkness and a sudden spurt of flame—

And I saw you standing there
All astare
In the flare,
And I stepped to meet you, crying on your name.

But the match went out, alack,
And the black
Night came back
To my heart, as I recalled with sudden fear

How upon your dying bed
 You had said
 That the dead
 Return to haunt the faithless once a year.

THE WHITE WHIPPET

SQUATTED on their hunkers at the corner of the street
 Outside The Pouter Pigeon a knot of pitmen sat
 Waiting for the doors to open, cursing the raw sleet,
 Or muttering with husky throats dully of this and that :

When suddenly within the ring of the street-lamp's gusty flame,
 Out of the stormy shadows of the black November night,
 Like a little slip of moonshine a snow-white whippet came
 And stayed one breathless moment before their startled sight.

Speechless they gazed upon her as she stood with lifted paw,
 Clean-limbed, with quivering muzzle and jetty eyes agleam,
 Nor heard the doors swing open wide as each lad looked with awe
 One moment on the vision of his own heart's secret dream.

THE NEW OILSKINS

AND him in his new oilskins too !
 Was all she said
 When up the brae and to her door
 We bore her dead.

We laid the corpse the sea had stripped
 Upon the bed,
 And left the widow to her watch
 Beside the dead.

And him in his new oilskins too !
 Was all she said :
 Yet when we sailed again at dawn
 The wife was dead.

THE SACRIFICE

HE slipped aside
The white-hot slide
And gazed upon the bubbling steel ;
And stood astare
Until the glare
Had blinded him, and like a wheel
With white-hot fellow sparking red
His brain was turning in his head.

Night after night
He'd watched that white
And bubbling hell-broth seethe and boil :
His wits had fed
The furnace red
Till now, at last released from toil,
He shrivelled up without a whine
Before the fire-god's glowing shrine.

THE WRECK

SHE broke amidships : as the hull
Parted, the boxes from the hold
Poured crashing out, and she went down
Into a sea of ruddy gold :

And in a twinkling I was dropped
Into the swallow and the strife
Of surf, to battle in a swirl
Of floating oranges for life.

THE COLT

THE colt kicked his heels in the air
And rolled in the dew,
As dandy and devil-may-care
I went out to woo.

Hock-deep in the mire and the muck
He stood in the rain,
As dowly and down on my luck
I crept home again.

My heart when I set out to woo
Was a colt in the sun,
But a drookit and draggle-tailed screw
When the wooing was done.

THE BLIND-WORM

WHEN I stroked his cold dry skin,
His black tongue flickered out and in.

*Flicker your black tongue three times three
If my true love is safe at sea.*

I stroked him thrice and thrice, and then
I stroked his cold skin twice again :

And each time out the quick tongue came,
And flickered like a wee black flame.

At three times three, my fingers shook :
I shut my eyes, afraid to look ;

And when I opened them the snake
Had vanished in the withered brake.

ADRIFT

WE heaved the body overboard—
The tenth man who had died :
Then gasping side by side
Askance each other eyed.

The sea was glass, the sky was brass—
The boat a white-hot grid
Beneath that brazen lid
As to the thwarts we slid

Each eyeing still the other, each
Knowing the other knew
The one thought of the two—
Who should heave over who ?

Which of the twain left out of twelve
On that dead sea accurst
Should first give in and first
Fall to the fiend of thirst ?

Which of the twain be left to heave
A corpse of skin and bone
O'erboard to sink like stone ;
And then drop back alone

Yet living to the thwarts, alone
On blistering boards to lie
Unburied 'neath that sky
Of brass, eternally

Thirsting for bottomless long draughts
Of home-brewed bitter beer,
Icy and amber-clear . . .
The barmaid holds so near,

So near the lips, then snatches back
Just as you stoop to drink,
And lets fall with a clink
And splash into the sink . . .

When suddenly his eyes burned red :
He rose and with a cry
Plunged overboard, and I,
Who somehow could not die,

Was left—to come once more to port . . .
 And in my bed again
 Heave over ten dead men
 Night after night, and then

Watch jealously again while he
 Dives headlong—mad to leap
 With him into death's deep
 And everlasting sleep !

NED NIXON AND HIS MAGGIE

WILL you come with me, Maggie, to Stagshaw Bank Fair ?
 Come with you where—come with you where ?
 Do you fancy a lass has naught better to do
 Than to go gallivanting, Ned Nixon, with you ?

If you come with me, Maggie, I'll buy you a ring.
 You'll do no such thing—you'll do no such thing.
 Do you fancy I'd let my lad squander his pence
 On tokens and trinkets and such-like nonsense ?

Come, Maggie, come, Maggie, we're only once young !
 Now hold your fool's tongue—now hold your fool's tongue !
 If we're only young once it behoves us to be
 A common-sense couple and act cannily.

Time enough, Maggie, for sense when we're old.
 Does copper turn gold—does copper turn gold,
 Or a guff turn wiseacre at three-score-and-ten ?
 Anyhow, I'm for taking no chances with men.

Then must I go lonesome to Stagshaw Bank Fair ?
 What do I care—what do I care ?
 But if you go lonesome I'd have you to know
 It's lonesome the rest of your life you will go.

DEAD MAN'S BROW

As for the first time over Dead Man's Brow
That snell November day I drove the share
The coulter struck a stone that checked the plough,
Tilting it upright with the hafts in air.

With arms wellnigh out of their sockets jerked
I tried to drag the handles down in vain ;
Then, stooping, long with breaking back I worked
To free the coulter, till with thews astrain

At length I lifted a huge slab that lay
Lid-fashion on a kist of up-edged stones,
Uncovering to the light and air of day
A huddled skeleton of ash-grey bones.

With knee-joints drawn up to its jowl, it clasped
Its bony arms about its ribs, and seemed
To shudder from the icy east that rasped
My living cheek ; and as the chill light gleamed

Upon its flawless teeth of fleckless white
The girning skull gaped at me with a groan—
Why have you broken in upon the night ?
Why can't you let a buried man alone ?

This thousand year I've lain in dreamless rest,
Forgetful of the wind that flicked my blood
And roused the hunting hunger in my breast
To course the fells and ford the brawling flood

Of burns that thundered in a winter spate,
Questing a quarry that for ever fled
Beyond the further fell-top, until fate
Tripped me and tumbled me among the dead ;

And I at last knew peace and slept secure
Within my quiet little house of stones.
Must I another doom of life endure ?
Why have you waked the hunger in my bones ?

I dropped the slab ; and took the hafts and turned
My team, and made back homewards with my plough,
Leaving the hunter to the rest he'd earned
Beneath the windy bent of Dead Man's Brow.

THE ROSE

STANDING on the hot white quay
With her hands upon her hips,
Gaily she glanced down at me,
A red rose between her lips.

As I looked up from the stern
Suddenly that rose's red
In my blood began to burn
Till a fire was in my head,

And that hair as black as night
Up against the blazing blue,
And those jet eyes sparking bright
And that red rose slowly drew

All my very heart's blood out :
And I followed in a spell
When she smiled and turned about—
But I caught the rose's smell

As my lips to hers drew near :
And I paused . . . and stood again
With my arms round my own dear
By a rosebush in the rain.

Vanished was that hot white quay
In a garden's rainy gloam
As my heart came back to me
On the rose's breath of home.

NEW MOON

I

NEW moon, *he said*—the first
 I've ever seen through glass :
 Well, let us hope the worst
 Won't come to pass.

A when new moons I've seen,
 For I am ninety-three,
 And never aught between
 The moon and me.

She's bonnie still, *said he*,
 Though something sharp and cold.
 We'll see what we shall see
 When she is old.

NEW MOON

II

A SKIRLING squeaky piping—
 Tweedledee, tweedledee,
 And the drubbing of a drum,
 Tum . . . tum . . .
 And the niggers on the quay
 Stole my young heart from the sea ;
 And I leapt ashore and shuffled with them,
 Ruffled with them, scuffled with them,
 Prancing to that piping—
 Tweedledee, tweedledee,
 To the piping sharp and thin
 That gets underneath the skin,
 And the drubbing of the drum,
 Tum . . . tum . . .
 That rumbles through the midriff like the roll of
 kingdom-come—
 Tum . . . tum . . . tum . . .

And I couldn't face my messmates
 When they'd seen me foot it there
 To the drubbing of the drum—
 Tum . . . tum . . .
 Galumphing like a bear
 Mother-naked to the air
 With a lot of fantee stumping niggers,
 Clumping belly-thumping niggers—
 Lost to England, Home, and Beauty
 By the piping sharp and thin
 That gets underneath the skin,
 And the drubbing of the drum—
 Tum . . . tum . . .
 That rumbles through the midriff like the roll of
 kingdom-come—
 Tum . . . tum . . . tum . . .

NEW MOON

III

NIGHT without a break
 Brooded overhead
 As we lay awake
 On our bracken-bed.

So I shut my eyes,
 Burdened by the weight
 Of those starless skies
 And our luckless fate.

But as I lay still
 She sat up in bed :
Turn your coppers, Bill—
The new moon ! she said.

THE CHESTNUT-BLOSSOM

THE chestnut-blossom fell
In the dark waters of the well
As, crouching on the coping-stone, he hearkened
To catch the first note of the passing-bell.

*The blossom, white and red,
Floats lightly where it falls, he said—
But there are drowning deeps in those dark waters
For him who plunges boldly without dread.*

*One passing-bell, said he—
One bell shall serve for her and me,
To speed our souls upon their way together
Through the dark portals of eternity.*

But, even as he dreamed,
Thicklier the falling blossom streamed
Down the well-shaft and, settling on the water,
Like the white body of his love it seemed :

And, shot with sudden dread
As the first note boomed overhead,
He shrank from plunging through that drift of blossom,
And home, with fingers in his ears, he fled.

THE MAID AND HER MOTHER

*HARK to the curlew
Whistling down the syke !
Curlew—curlew ?
Who ever heard the like !
What bird may it be, then ?
Never any bird
Whistled will you walk with me
That ever I heard.*

*Who can it be, then,
Whistling down the syke ?
Some lonely laddie
Behind the stell-dyke.
What shall I answer ?
Bless you, my bird,
No lassie ever questioned
That ever I heard.*

AT THE PIT-HEAD

BLACK was his face
With the dust of the pit,
But bright as hot coals
His eyes burned in it

The first time I felt
His gaze fixed on me,
And wondering turned
Half-frightened to see

The fire of his heart
That paled the sunshine
Blazing out of the eyes
That looked into mine,

Till an answering flame
In my bosom was lit
By those eyes burning out
From the mirk of the pit.

HE AND SHE

COME, give me your answer :
You know that I love you true.
*Pluck me a speedwell,
And happen I'll answer you.*

A speedwell ! How should I
Know one from another bloom ?
*You must wait for your answer,
Then, till the day of doom.*

*You can't pick a speedwell,
And yet you've a fancy you
Can choose out a maiden ?
And wed her and all, I do !*

Though happen I mayn't know
One bloom from another bloom—
It's now for your answer,
And this be the day of doom.

BLACK-COUNTRY NIGHT

SUDDENLY the hiss of steam
In the quiet of the night—
And I wake to watch the gleam
Of the leaping furnace-light.

I have barely dropped asleep,
Barely for a breath forgot
The hot blasts of hate that keep
Anger in my heart still hot,

When that hissing in the dark,
Like the night deriding me,
Blows to blaze the smouldering spark—
To a glare that instantly

Fills the cauldron of my brain ;
And I rise to pace the room
Till the labouring day again
Calls me with the buzzer's boom.

THE RAGGED BIRK

YOU have come back ?—he said.

I have come back.

Tell me, is some one dead,

That you wear black ?

Where have you been, my son—

Come, tell me where ?

Life's now but little fun,

Tied to a chair

Brooding the whole day long

On days gone by

When I was young and strong—

I, even I !

Speak, lad, and tell me now

Where you have been ?

Over the Dead Man's Brow

To Birkshaw Green.

Did John go with you too ?

Ay, he was there.

Walking, the two of you,

Taking the air ?

Well to be young, my lad,

Tramping the heather—

Can't I just see you, gad,

Chattering together,

Careless and free and gay,

You and your brother !

Little we found to say,

One to the other.

What, you've not quarrelled, Ben ?

Quarrelled ? Nay, dad !

Where have you left him, then—

Quick, tell me, lad ?

Where is my younger son ?
Under the birk.
The birk ? *Ay, the ragged one*
Hard by the kirk.

Left him, my little Jack,
There in the night ?
And he—does he too wear black ?
Nay, he wears white.

SALLY BLACK AND GEORDIE GREEN

OH, where may you be going with your black mare sleeked so
shinily,
With her four hoofs newly varnished and her feathers combed so
clean,
With her mane and tail straw-plaited, pranked so gay and smart
and nattily
With red and yellow ribbons tied in lovelocks, Geordie Green ?
I be going to the Fair
With my mare.

Then won't you take me with you, for I've never been to Stagshaw
Bank,
Nor a hiring nor a hopping, though I'm nearly seventeen,
And I've never had a fairing, faldalal nor whigmaleerie nor
A red and yellow ribbon for my lovelocks, Geordie Green ?
I can't manage but one mare
At the Fair.

Now what can you be fearing, and I but a young lassie too,
And you, a lad of twenty ? But if so it be you're mean,
I've saved up thirteen pennies, so no need to fear I'll beggar you
Or be beholden to you for one farthing, Geordie Green.
I'll be getting to the Fair
With my mare.

Then gan your gait and luck to you at Stagshaw Bank, your mare
 and you ;
 But maybe you'll be rueing when you see me like a queen
 In Farmer Dodd's new dogcart with the shafts and spokes picked
 out with red,
 Overtake you on the road there and flash by you, Georgie Green.
Yet I'll happen reach the Fair
With my mare.

THREE

THREE whaups rose from the moss
 As I came by,
 And, whistling, wheeled across
 The darkening sky.

Three hoolets from the fern
 Flew silently,
 And vanished down the burn
 In front of me.

And, stumbling through the gloam,
 My heart's adread
 For three I left at home
 Hapt safe in bed.

THE WISHING-WELL

LASS, I've heard tell
 That in this well
 The Roman folk would chuck,
 When things were going ill with them,
 A coin or so for luck.

And their great Wall's a ruin on the fell,
And naught of their camp living but this well !

Ay, lass, that's so ;
And yet although
Their rampart could not stand,
Who knows but luck meant getting back
Again to their own land ?

*So, you've chucked our last copper in the well ?
Well, what luck is or isn't, who can tell !*

THE PARROT

LONG since I'd ceased to care
Though he should curse and swear
The little while he spent at home with me :
And yet I couldn't bear
To hear his parrot swear
The day I learned my man was drowned at sea.

He'd taught the silly bird
To jabber word for word
Outlandish oaths that he'd picked up at sea ;
And now it seemed I heard
In every wicked word
The dead man from the deep still cursing me.

A flood of easing tears,
Though I'd not wept for years,
Brought back old long-forgotten dreams to me,
The foolish hopes and fears
Of the first half-happy years
Before his soul was stolen by the sea.

THE BAT

SHE dreamed she lay in frozen fear,
Yet living, in the icy tomb . . .
And wakened in the dark to hear
A bat flit-flitter round her room.

Unseen in the cold pitchy night
It circled swiftly overhead
Unceasingly in frightened flight,
Till, as she quaked upon her bed,

Too overcome with fear to stir,
One icicle from head to feet,
The flit-flit-flitter seemed to her
The flurry of her own heart's beat—

Her young heart flying round and round
Imprisoned in its own despair—
The stone-cold chamber underground
With no escape to light and air,

No window to the sun, no door
To winds that call the wanderer,
Where she must dwell for evermore
Since life had broken faith with her.

ANNABEL ROSE AND JEREMIAH FAIRLEY

WHY did you call me, Jeremiah Fairley—
Why did you call me as I went by ?
Never had the blackbird sung more rarely,
Never had the sun shone brighter in the sky
Than when I heard you calling, crying on my name,
And into my young heart the strange trouble came.
Why did you answer me, Annabel Rose ?
Goodness gracious only knows !
Annabel Rose, you're speaking true,
And that is just my answer too.

Why did you marry me, Jeremiah Fairley ?
Why did you carry me home to your farm ?
Bleak blows the wind and the sun shines rarely,
And little care you now if I should come to harm.
Why did you marry me and give me your name
To bring me to trouble and sorrow and shame ?

*Why did you come with me, Annabel Rose ?
 Goodness gracious only knows !
 Annabel Rose, you're speaking true,
 And that is just my answer too.*

Why must a young lass be such a featherhead
 To trip to the beck and nod of any man ?
*Life's never been all lying on a feather bed
 For any farm-wife since the world began.*
 Why should a lass, then, unless she is mad,
 Give up her freedom to drudge for any lad ?
*What's the use of asking, Annabel Rose ?
 Goodness gracious only knows !
 Annabel Rose, you're speaking true,
 And that is just my answer too.*

A.B.

*I'VE done with the sea, he said
 Each time he came ashore ;
 But ever before the month was out
 With empty pocket Melchisedek Prout
 Signed on for one trip more.*

And nothing at all he said
 When it came to sink or swim :
 It warn't for the likes of an old A.B.
 To say that he was done with the sea
 Till the sea was done with him.

THE CONCERTINA

THE twangling of a zither
 And the thin
 Tinkle of a mandolin
 With the plunking of guitars
 Underneath the Naples stars
 Is a pretty sort of music to while away a night
 With delight :
 But a concertina playing in a pub at Hartlepool
 For a devil-rousing racket can put the lot to school.

If I'd only stayed at Naples
 Evermore
 In that café by the shore,
 Listening to the pretty tunes
 Of Italian pantaloons,
 I'd still have hopes of glory and a mansion in the sky
 By and by :
 But the devil in his tangles took and tripped me like a fool
 When he played a concertina in a pub at Hartlepool.

THE HAND

THIS hand, *Tod said*—you see this hand,
 Four fingers and a thumb . . .
 It's difficult to understand . . .
 And Dan, in kingdom-come !

A hand like any other hand—
 The very same that he
 Gripped when he came, the first to land
 After ten months at sea.

It's difficult to understand,
 Now that Dan's lying dead,
 That it's still plump and brown, my hand
 That should be shrunk and red !

CLIP-CLOPCLOP

CLIP-CLOPCLOP, clip-clopclop—
 The overstepping mare,
 And Farmer Hogg comes here again :
 But I—what do I care ?

While Dicky sports a spanking cob
 That canters light as air,
 I'll never wed a man that drives
 An overstepping mare.

GIRL'S SONG

I WAS so happy that I hardly knew it,
Nor ever guessed that life was not all play,
And little dreamt I'd live to see the dawning
Of such a day—
Oh why, why should it be
That suddenly
Life should seem strange and terrible to me ?

I'd never cared for lads like other lasses
Nor heeded overmuch what they might say,
And little dreamt I'd live to see the dawning
Of such a day—
Oh why, why should it be
That suddenly
A lad's word should mean life and death to me ?

DROWNED AT SEA

HIS fathers sleep in steadfast graves
Under the unadventurous mould ;
But him, who for the salt sea sold
His birthright, still the vagrant waves
In endless vagabondage hold.

Not his the kindly sleep of earth
Who ever scorned the soil in life :
Tied to no spot by bairns and wife,
Sea-called and chosen from his birth,
He keeps the way of salty strife :

Far from the quiet fields of home
Where all his folk clod-cumbered lie,
On tossing crests when winds are high
His spirit rides through crashing foam
And whistles to the whistling sky.

THE PROMISE

FAINT as a watch's tick,
As Kate stood by the sea,
She seemed to hear his pick
Tapping unceasingly
In the dark workings of the pit
To earn the price of brat and bit.

She watched the light wind whisk
The curd from creaming waves
And glancing waters glisk
And glint in hanging caves,
While in her heart she heard the sound
Of Robert hewing underground.

And as she stood adream,
Her young heart keeping beat
With his in that dark seam
Fathoms beneath her feet,
Haze-gazing on the unseen tide,
She felt a new pulse in her side—

The pulse of waking life
That promised he and she
Not merely man and wife
Ever again should be,
Since now into their coil of cares
Came a small heart to beat with theirs.

THE WEAZEL

A STREAK of red, the weazel shot
Into the Gallows Wood :
I heard a dying rabbit squeal,
And for a moment stood

Uncertain—then, as by some spell,
Drawn in through briar and thorn,
I followed in the weazel's track,
By clutching brambles torn.

Blindly I followed till I came
To a clearing in the fir ;
Then startled suddenly I stopped
As my glance lit on her—

The strapping red-haired tinker wench
Who stood with hands on hips,
And watched me with defiant eyes
And parted panting lips.

At first I only saw her eyes,
Her lips, her hair's fierce red :
And then I saw the huddled man
Who at her feet lay dead.

She saw I saw, yet never blenched,
But still looked straight at me
With parted lips and steady eyes,
And muttered quietly—

*I'll go : no need to make a fuss,
Though you've come gey and quick :
You must have smelt the blood—and so
The hangman takes the trick !*

*But what care I, since I am free
Of him and all his lies,
Since I have stopped his dirty tongue
And shut his sneaky eyes.*

*What matter though I kick my heels
In air for settling Jim ?
The vermin's dead : at least I'll make
A cleaner end than him.*

TARRAGONA

BEFORE the *Tarragona* came
 I'd never even heard her name,
 Nor dreamt what it would mean to me
 When she again put out to sea.

Before the *Tarragona* came
 No one might breathe a word of blame
 Of me, or look askance at me,
 Since I was born beside the sea.

Now day and night the bitter name
 Sounds in my ear the word of shame.
 And *Tarragona* means to me
 The false heart of the fickle sea.

KATHERINE VEITCH

HE fell at Loos : and when she heard
 The tidings, though she did not stir,
 Some light within her at the word
 Was darkened, and it seemed to her
 Death sought to snatch her bairn from her—
 To snatch her sucking babe from her :

And she forgot that he had grown
 A hefty lad to be her pride,
 A shepherd for skilled piping known
 Throughout the hilly Borderside
 Until death took him from her side,
 No more to seek his minney's side.

By day or night she cannot rest—
 Stravaging over Auchopecairn
 She clutches to her naked breast
 An old clout-dolly like a bairn,
 And moans—*My bairn, my hinney bairn !*
Death shall not have my wee bit bairn !

WATTY LEE AND YOUNG DICK

Now where may you be gadding to with such a dandy buttonhole—
 If my eyes do not deceive me it's a sweetheart picotee,
 And in your Sunday-go-to-meeting clothes and bowler hat and all?
I'm going to Saint Andrew's Church, as surely you might see,
Watty Lee.
 Ay, maybe!

Though it's well enough on Sundays for the folk who've got naught
 else to do,
 The church on weekday mornings is no place for you or me
 Who've got our bread and cheese to earn; so what can you be
 after, Dick?
I'm going to be married there, as surely you might see,
Watty Lee.
 Ay, maybe!

Then you don't know where you're going, Dick, for all your dandy
 buttonhole,
 No more than any other lad who sports a picotee
 And dons his Sunday-go-to-meeting clothes and bowler hat and all.
You're surely hard of hearing or your wits are all at sea,
Watty Lee.
 Ay, maybe!

THE MASTER

NIGH to the window-sill the snow
 Had drifted when 'twas time to go,
 And, lifted shoulder-high, we bore
 The master from Starkacre door.

His well-beloved fields in snow
 Were shrouded when 'twas time to go,
 And in the shieling snug and warm
 His flock was sheltered from the storm.

Stormbound and blinded by the snow
 Nor sheep nor pasture saw him go,
 Although his whole heart's hopes and fears
 Had been bound up in them for years.

Indifferent to the driving snow
 He went when it was time to go,
 And yet it's hard to think that he
 Left flock and field indifferently.

WHY WON'T YOU STAY ?

WHY won't you stay at home with me ?
 How the devil should I know, mother ?
 I've never wanted to go to sea,
 And yet, and yet, somehow or other . . .

Why won't you stay at home with me ?
 How the devil should I know, lass ?
 I've never wanted to go to sea,
 Yet, somehow, when I've had a glass . . .

Why won't you stay at home with me ?
 How the devil should I know, wife ?
 I've never wanted to go to sea,
 Yet, somehow, I've signed on for life.

MOTHER AND MAID

AND where be you stravaiging to at such an hour of night ?
To look on Allen Water in the full moonlight.
 Go your wilful ways then ; but you will learn too soon
 That no good comes to any lass from looking on the moon.

And where be you stravaiging to at this unearthly hour ?
To hearken to the hoolet that hoots by Staward Tower.
 Round the Peel at midnight the brags and horneys prow, l,
 And no good comes to any lass from listening to the owl.

So don't say I've not warned you whatever may betide.
And what should I be fearing with Robert at my side ?
 What should you be fearing ? Since the world began
 No good has come to any lass from walking with a man.

DOWN THE DALE

NANNIE'S going down the dale—

Peter fleered as I went by.
Meaning soon I'd come to lie
In the graveyard by the Swale.

Hearing him I just stopped dead,
Turned and eyed him up and down
From the toe-cap to the crown,
But no single word I said.

Peter's years were just threescore
Short of mine—a likely lad :
Yet, while I've the health I had,
Peter Perkins is no more.

To a scrag of skin and bone
Dwining like a body curst,
Peter reached the dale-foot first,
Overtaking the old crone.

THE RAVEN'S CROAK

THE raven, he croaks on the cairn—

A wife had a bairn ;
And the bairn was her heart's delight
From morning till night :
But when he grew up, with a knife
He let out her life ;
And they took him and strung him on high
To dance in the sky,
Then cut down the corpse, and a cairn
Built over her bairn—
Ay, buried his mother's delight
In the dead of the night :
And naught but a rackle of bones
Lies under the stones.

*So the old raven croaks on the cairn
As I dandle my bairn.*

YOUNG RICHARD

SLICING the swedes for the steers
At the blink of the light,
Young Richard remembers with tears
The luck of last night—

Last night when he put to the test
His dream of a home,
And poured out the love of his breast
At the fall of the gloam—

To the spurting of milk in the pail
In the dusk of the byre,
Poured into Meg's ears the whole tale
With bosom afire ;

Then waited, with blood running cold,
For a token of grace ;
When the lass looked up brazen and bold
And laughed in his face ;

And he flinched from the flick of her mirth
As a colt from the lash—
His golden dream crumbled to earth,
A heap of cold ash :

And he wandered the whole night forlorn
By braeside and slack
Till the first chilly glint of the morn
Brought day's labour back.

And now as he slices the swedes
It seems that the knife
Cuts clean through his heart, and it bleeds
A torrent of life—

A torrent of hot life unstayed ;
Yet the quivering flesh
Re-knits, that each fall of the blade
May cleave it afresh.

MOTHERS

Of her calf bereft,
All night long she lows :
Of her firstling joy
Born of anguished throes
Naught to her is left.

Six sweet days of bliss
Swelled her heart with pride
While her baby boy
Nuzzled her warm side,
All to end in this—

Hollow echoing night,
One long empty ache
Moaning sleeplessly :
And I lie awake
Praying that the light

Of the morrow's morn
Bring to her the rest
Still denied to me,
Since from out my breast
My first love was torn.

BAG-OF-BONES

A BAG-OF-BONES with nodding head
I met at Tavernspite.
*You're old for travelling, I said,
Although you travel light.*

*I travel light enough, my son,
Though roads be stiff and steep,
Since my twelve children one by one
Have cried themselves to sleep,*

*And my old woman took to bed
A year come Christmas night.
With neither kith nor kin, he said,
An old man travels light.*

BARRACOMB

IN the dead man's bed I lay
Longing for the break of day—
Light enough for me to rise
And feast the first time eager eyes
On the pastures broad and fair
That had fallen to my share
As my uncle's only heir.

Last night in the wintry gloam
I had come to Barracomb :
Never in my life before
Had I opened the front door,
Never crossed the threshold-stone—
I who hadn't even known
The old man who'd lived alone

Reckless of his kin till death
Laid him low and choked his breath,
Forcing him to let his lands
Pass into a stranger's hands—
Forcing him to leave his home
High on windy Barracomb
For a lodging in the loam.

In the wide and creaky bed
All night long I'd tossed, my head
Filled with plans of all I'd do
Now good fortune had come true,
And the wealth he'd held so fast
In his miser-grip at last
Into better hands had passed :

When, as I lay there wide-eyed,
Some one seemed to quit my side,
Though all night alone I'd lain ;
And against the window-pane
Stood a ghostly form and grey
Peering out across the brae
For the first chill glint of day.

Stark with dread I lay astare
Watching that strange shadow there,
Dark against the kindling sky ;
And my blood ran cold as I
Wondered if that shape might be
The ghost of old John Heatherly
Or my own fetch awaiting me.

THE CHANCE-BAIRN

THE corbie and the kestrel
Are robbers to all the rest,
But the corbie gives chase to the kestrel
That hovers too near his nest
When fatherhood's fierce tenderness
Kindles the corbie's breast.

The corbie and the kestrel
Are robbers to all the rest—
But better for you, my sorrow,
Sucking my bitter breast,
Better for you had you been born
In the fierce corbie's nest.

THE ESCAPE

TOOTHLESS, lanthorn-jawed and bald,
Bent and hobbling on two sticks,
Helpless by his burning ricks
Old Jake Jackson raged and called—
Bawled and called in vain for help :
All his hands were at the fair
Junketing, and none was there
To hear or heed his frantic yelp
As he watched the thirsty flame
Lapping up his golden wheat,
Till at last the glare and heat
His old senses overcame,

And he flung away his sticks—
Nimble as a two-year-old
Leapt into the roaring gold
And perished with his burning ricks.

When they came back from the fair
All in vain for him they called,
Round the steading searched and bawled—
Could not find him anywhere—
Bawled and called for him in vain :
Ricks and man were smouldering ash
Sizzling in the sudden splash
Of a burst of thunder-rain.
Though they raked the ashes through,
Of their master they found naught :
So the coffin he had bought
Second-hand, as good as new,
And beneath his bed had kept,
Was no bargain after all ;
And the grave-plot by the wall
Nigh where his forefathers slept,
He'd long rented, wasted too !
Not for him in clammy gloom
To await the crack of doom,
Seeped and sodden through and through
In the sour and wormy mould
Where his outstripped kinsmen lie—
He the first to reach the sky
Charioted in fiery gold !

HAUNTED

THE forepeak raked the stars
As we drove upon the Scars,
Then dipped into a boiling broth of hell :
With his arms about my neck,
I was sinking with the wreck,
When I drew my little knife and used it well—

In his thrapple to the haft
Sheathed my gully, and I laughed
As I felt his death-grip loosen round my own ;
And I struck out for the land,
And was slung upon the strand
By a wave that took and tossed me like a stone.

Stunned and senseless there I lay
Till I roused at blink of day
To feel a leaden burden on my chest ;
And as I strove to rise
I looked down into the eyes
Of the dead man's head that lolled upon my breast.

Stark and staring he lay there,
And the waves had stripped him bare
Ere they'd flung his broken body over me :
And I rose as if in sleep,
Howked a hole, and dark and deep
I buried him beside the Northern sea—

Rolled a rock above his grave
Lest a sudden scouring wave
Should scoop his naked carcase from the sand :
Then I left him—so I thought—
Dead and done with, and I sought
Food and shelter from the people of the land—

Left him buried . . . But for me
There's no sleep by land or sea,
For always when I'm dropping off to rest
I am startled wide awake,
And all night I lie and quake
With the dead-weight of a corpse upon my chest.

Yet never in this life
Have I used the butcher's knife,
Never sailed the seas nor left my native shore ;
And I know not from what deep
Stirs the doom that breaks my sleep
To keep lykewake with the dead for evermore.

RACHEL REED

*DANCE for your daddy,
My canny laddie,
Dance for your mammy,
My wee lamb. . . .*

Day-long beside the smouldering slack
She dodders, crooning with a grin—
Who, one wanchancy seven-night back,
Was hale to work day out day in—

Who'd rise at the first glisk of light,
And take no ease until the sun
Behind Black Belling dipped from sight,
Her long and lonesome day's darg done.

And as she singled swedes she had
Just one thought ever in her mind—
How one fine night her headstrong lad
That she could neither hold nor bind

Would come again to Callerlea
When he had had his coltish fling,
To rest beneath his own roof-tree,
Dog-weary with calleevering.

Bone-tired she crept to bed that night
And slumbered sound till twelve o'clock,
Then started, listening, bolt-upright,
Awaked by some unearthly shock.

She heard his footstep on the stair :
She heard the clicking of the sneck :
The door swung wide, and he stood there—
A ghostly halter round his neck.

*Dance for your daddy,
My canny laddie,
Dance for your mammy,
My wee lamb. . . .*

STILLCHESTERS

THREE hundred years the Forsters' flocks had grazed
Stillchesters, by the ploughshare never broken,
Till the wanchancy day the word was spoken
That gave the strangers leave to dig, and raised
The dead to trouble us and drive us crazed.

They told us that Stillchesters once had been
A Roman camp, and that the walls yet lay
Beneath the smooth turf buried from the day.
Would God those broken walls still lay unseen
Beneath the kindly turf's unbroken green !

They took us with their talk of fighting men,
Of Spanish cohorts, altars, and rich treasure,
And so I gave them leave to have their pleasure
With my best pasture, little dreaming then
Stillchesters never should know peace again.

It's true my poor old mother tried to warn
Her foolish son, and looked at me sore-frightened,
But when I saw how my young wife's eyes brightened
At their fine words I granted leave. The morn
They cut the turf our only son was born.

Although till then the Forsters had been fair,
And though his mother's hair was yellow too,
And her bright eyes like mine a Northern blue,
The bairn was sallow-skinned and had dark hair,
And looked at us with big black eyes astare.

His mother loved her headstrong gipsy sore,
But he was aye a changeling from that day,
Until he broke her heart and went away
To be a soldier, 'listing for a war
In foreign lands, and never came back more.

Three hundred years the Forsters' flocks had grazed
Stillchesters, till a light word rashly said
Unearthed old quarrels of the ancient dead,
And some black Spaniard's restless spirit raised
To drive the last of all the Forsters crazed—

To drive the last of all the Forsters fey,
 Rousing the fighting fever in his blood
 Whose sires had all been shepherds since the Flood :
 So when my time comes, as it must one day,
 Whose flocks shall graze Stillchesters, who can say ?

I HEARD A SAILOR . . .

*I HEARD a sailor talking,
 As he tossed upon his bed
 In hot uneasy slumber,
 And this is what he said :*

Why does she shake her head at me
 Until her ear-rings tinkle,
 Though all the while her merry smile
 Keeps her blue eyes atwinkle ?

Why does she slyly glance at me
 As she pours out the wine,
 Then pucker up her pretty lips
 And hold them up to mine ?

Why does she suddenly draw back
 And o'er my shoulder stare ?
 Why does that silly parrot screech ?
 Why does the gas-jet flare ?

And who's the lad that's running round
 Upon the heaving floor
 With a knife betwixt his shoulder-blades—
 And cannot find the door ?

Why does the scarlet parrot screech ?
 Why does the gas flare red ?
 Why do her tinkling ear-rings dance
 A hornpipe in my head ?

GALLOWS BANK

LAST night, as I was stepping ben
Just as the Abbey clock struck ten,
My heart thrilled to the tramp of men
That climbed the Gallows Bank :
And turning to the open door
I watched them trudging, four and four,
Breasting the brae with moonlight hoar,
Rank after ragged rank.

Their arms against their sides were bound :
Their mouths were gagged ; and not a sound
Their feet made on the frozen ground
Nor cast a shadow there,
As up the unreturning road
They shuffled, hobbled, limped, and strode
With eyes set on the tree that showed
Stark in the snell night air—

The gallows-tree of stout ash-wood
That handy on the fell-top stood
For folk who come to little good
Against the star-pricked sky.
Horse-copers, tinkers, thieving herds,
And doxies flaunting fakish flerds,
An endless gang of gallows-birds,
I watched them wamble by—

I watched them hirple up the hill,
Drawn up and up against their will,
Those grey ghosts shadowless and still—
For only in my heart
Had echoed that tramp-tramp of feet,
And nothing but my own heart's beat
Had drawn me to the haunted street—
When with a sudden start

I saw the whole rascalion rout
Each man of blood and sleiching lout
Stop all at once and wheel about
And fix their eyes on me :

And as I watched, the starry skies
And moonlit road and heathy rise
Vanished, and naught was there but eyes
That glowered murderously—

Hundreds of eyes that stared in mine,
Of lads and lasses clarty-fine
Who'd perished by the banks of Tyne
When first it topped the fell,
That tree new tarred with hempen noose,
Straw-coloured, dangling long and loose
For any chance-come traveller's use
To sling him slick to hell.

And then the eyes of every one—
The eyes of the whole gairishon,
Each daddy's daughter, mother's son,
Who'd danced with heels in air
Since reivers rode the Borderside,
And men had thieved and fought and died,
And wenched and murdered, sneaked and lied—
Shrank to a single stare :

And as from out the heart of night
Those dead eyes searched me wildfire-bright
I looked into their murder-light
And, startled, knew, alas,
That I was staring in my own
Scared eyes where, frozen to the bone,
New-risen from sleep I stood alone
Before my looking-glass.

BEAUTY FOR ASHES

THE FOWLER

A WILD bird filled the morning air
With dewy-hearted song :
I took it in a golden snare
With meshes close and strong.

But where is now the song I heard ?
For all my cunning art,
I who would house a singing-bird
Have caged a broken heart.

“ . . . AS SCARLET . . . ”

SCARLET the toadstools burn
In black mould by the linn,
Yet not more fiery red
Than my soul's sin.

Sodden as last year's leaves,
My life seemed cold and dead,
When suddenly the black
Burst into red.

Fall quickly winter snow
To bury all from sight
In drift on drift of death's
Cold dazzling white.

THE BURIED CAMP

FEAR not : the dead are dead,
 And fallen pomp and power
 Leave no pale ghosts to prowl
 Above their earthly bed :
 'Twas no dead Roman but a living owl
 That startled us beside the ruined tower.

*And yet, that beak, those eyes
 That blazed out from the night !
 Surely 'twas Cæsar's soul
 That with sharp stabbing cries
 Swept by, as through the buried camp we stole,
 Spurring dead cohorts on to one last fight.*

THE ROCKET

INTO the night
 The rocket soars :
 Ah, could but I
 In flashing flight
 O'er the dull lamps
 Of earth swing high—
 One moment poise
 And perish there
 In the full blaze
 Of kindled air :
 What matter though
 A charred stick fall
 Into the night
 That swallows all.

STARS

WHO travelling through a midnight wood
 Tilts up his chin to watch the stars
 Will like enough trip over roots
 Or bark his shins against the knars :

But who, benighted in blind ways,
Struggles to thrust close boughs apart
Will never win from out the wood
Unless the stars are in his heart.

THE RIDER OF THE WHITE HORSE

CLIMBING the bridge's slope, a little lad,
I looked up and beheld in bright sunlight,
Against a billowing April cloud, blue-black,
Heavy with threat of hail, a monster white
High-stepping steed with the rider scarlet-clad
Like a flame-robed archangel on its back.

The spark-red nostril and the flashing eye,
The scarlet rider in the sun afire
Against the storm-cloud—shot with thrilling dread
My little heart ahunger with desire
Of angel visions : then, as they went by,
I knew 'twas old Jake Dodd in hunting-red—

Jake Dodd, the whipper-in, on his white Jill.
The sun was blotted out ; the hail threshed down,
Scattering the glory. Jake and his old mare
Have long been dust—yet, on the bridge's crown,
In the child's heart within my heart, Jake still
Rides, an archangel burning through the air.

WHERE NEITHER MOTH NOR RUST . . .

TREASURES three
Life's given me—

Opal-Heart of dawning dreams
Shot with restless fiery gleams :

Crystal-Heart by day and night
Glowing with the living light :

Amber-Heart that wells with mirth
Of the sun-enchanted earth.

Every dawn's a golden key
To unlock my treasury—
Heaven here and now for me !

THE VOICE

AT sunrise, swimming out to sea,
I heard a clear voice calling me
From the little wood whose branches lean
Over the restless water—
I heard, half-dreaming that I heard
The voice of some enchanted bird ;
And glancing back, among the green
I saw my little daughter.

When I must breast the stiller sea
That stretches everlastingly
Beneath the starless unknown night,
The darkness round me falling,
May it be given me to hear
Life calling me as crystal-clear—
To glance back once through failing light
And answer that sweet calling.

AUDREY

ON the sea's edge she dances—
Her glistening body bare
Amid the light foam glances,
Foam-light with tossing hair,
Eager for all that chances
By land or sea or air.

She dances yet undreaming
Of life's oncoming tide :
Yet when wild waters streaming
Surge round her deep and wide,
Her soul foam-light and gleaming
Shall every danger ride.

THE WIND-BELLS

LISTENING to the glassy tinkle
Of the painted Japanese
Wind-bells swaying in the breeze,
Michael sees
Butterflies of light that twinkle
Round the walls with golden glancing,
Glancing, dancing to the ringing
Of the crystal wind-bells swinging.

As he stands there listening, dreaming,
Fairer even than the flight
Of the butterflies of light
Flit the bright
Fancies in his blue eyes gleaming—
In his happy heart a rarer,
Rarer fairer music singing
Than the wind-bell's crystal ringing.

MICHAEL'S SONG

BECAUSE I set no snare
But leave them flying free,
All the birds of the air
Belong to me.

From the blue-tit on the sloe
To the eagle on the height,
Uncaged they come and go
For my delight.

And so the sunward way
I soar on the eagle's wings,
And in my heart all day
The blue-tit sings.

TO MICHAEL

DEAR Crystal-Heart, I pray that you
May do what I set out to do,
Easily and happily attain
What I have striven for in vain,
All that, for some infirmity
Of soul, life has denied to me.

May you breathe out as some blithe bird
All that my heart awaking heard
And laboured daylong to express
Through cloudy passion and sharp stress,
Till gushing from its crystal spring
Your song in all men's hearts shall sing :

And in that music clear and true
Even I at last attain through you.

A GARLAND FOR JOCELYN

I

LITTLE flame that barely kindled
Flickered low,
Little flame that paled and dwindled
As we watched you, grieving so
That the life our love had wakened
To the dark again should go.

How we strove and strove to win you
From the night,
Till the baby-spirit in you
Slowly conquered, burning bright,
And the jealous shades were scattered,
And our hearts were filled with light !

II

When I think of you I see
A flame-winged fritillary
Glancing over daffodils.

When I think of you I hear
Leaping laughing amber-clear
Sun-enchanted rills.

III

Lively as a trout,
Flashing in and out
The golden mesh of sunlight
That nets the crystal river—

Darting here and there
Through the dewy air
My little lassie frolics
With laughing life aquiver.

IV

When you dance
Amber-bright the sunbeams glance
In your tossing hair ;

So your name
Calls to mind a little flame
Dancing in the air—

Little flame for ever dancing
In the rain-washed air of April,
Amber flame through crystal glancing.

V

A charm or goldfinches
That flutter and flicker
Over daffodils flashing
Through sunshiny showers—

BEAUTY FOR ASHES

The light of your laughter
Flashes out of the silence
Though you have been sleeping
In dreamland for hours.

A CHILD'S DELIGHT

TRAPS for mice and snares for birds—
But who can take in a net of words
Fancies in their aery flight
To the crystal height
Of a child's delight ?

Now a golden fount of light
Spraying to a rainbow bright,
Then again
Tinkling drops of sunny rain
That turn to flaming butterflies
Ere they reach the earth and rise
In a cloud of changing dyes,
In a cloud that spans the skies
With a fiery flickering bow
Melting into flakes of snow
That falling change to starry flowers—
Flowers that from the earth take flight
Again on wings of singing light—
On and on through endless hours . . .

Traps for mice and snares for birds—
But empty is my net of words.

THE POOL

HER mind's a shallow bowl
Round which in naked light
The homeless goldfish glance
Like flame in all men's sight.

Dazzled I watch, then turn
Home-coming to the cool
Star-haunted secrecies
Of the dream-shadowed pool.

THE BOAT

TWO were at the oars and two,
Trailing hands, lolled in the bow
When the boat stole into sight
Round Emmanuel Head just now.

The sky was one fierce flame of sun,
The sea, a burnished glassy lake :
No creak or splash of oars was there :
The cleaving keel left no white wake.

I blinked a moment, my hot eyes
Bedazzled by the blinding light :
And when I looked about again
The silent boat had sunk from sight.

Then fearfully my heart recalled
How those most dear of all to me—
The four in that phantasmal boat—
Yet sojourned by another sea.

THE ADDER

COILED on a hot white stone
The adder basks
And nothing asks
Save to be let alone.

Yet somewhere in the ling
An enemy
Crawls stealthily
To rouse him up to sting :

BEAUTY FOR ASHES

So he must lift his head
Once more to fight,
Till in the light
He or his foe lie dead.

O heart, that you might rest,
And naught again
Rouse from their den
The angers of my breast !

IN THE BURROW

ON every hand beset
It seems we're trapped, and yet
Even now it's not too late
To try and outwit fate.

Who cowers in skulking dread
Of death's already dead.
While there's a breath or glisk
Of light let's take the risk.

Better to bolt and run
And chance the random gun
Than wait in huddled fear
The red-eyed ferret here.

UNITY

WHEN the cooling tyre contracts
Round the fellow of the wheel,
Do not spokes that once were boughs
In close-knitting fibres feel
A glow in being ironbound
In unity secure and round
For conquest of untravelled ground ?

SABBATH

LOWING of cattle as the twilight falls
Over green pastures and still waters deep ;
Then not a sound save where a late thrush calls
Good-night to all, and turns to sleep.

Till, as I dreaming watch the moon's first beam
Silver the river's smooth and silent flood,
The cheerful Christians in their chapel scream—
There is a fountain filled with blood . . .

FABLE

SAID the raven to the wren :
Why are you afraid of men !
You are nothing but a craven,
Said the raven.
While the raven still was talking,
Came a boy behind him stalking,
Caught him up and clipped his wings.
Still uncaptured Jenny sings.

PROVERB

THE pitcher that goes often to the well . . .
And where's the tragedy in what you tell ?
Better go every day for half a year
To fetch your fill of water cool and clear
And, brimmed with living crystal, happen fall
In shards and perish thus once and for all,
Than stand, a dust and fly-trap, on the shelf
For centuries with other useless self.

THE GUILLOTINE

OBEDIENT to the will of men
The giant blade descends again,
Slicing the molten steel like cheese
Just as the grimy pigmies please :

And something makes me laugh to see
One mass of metal quietly
Slicing another at the will
Of bow-legged Mike and one-eyed Bill.

EPITAPH

DEEPLY he drank of life, and scorned
The timid soul who sips,
And stumbled out into the night
With laughter on his lips.

Oh, grudge me not the like, O life,
When I too must depart—
A gallant stirrup-cup to warm
The cockles of my heart !

THE PIT

WITH twinkling watery eyes and wheezily
Old Peter Walker laughed
And gave his chest a thump—
Well, if you're sick of living, you may easily
Drop down the empty shaft,
And lie in the black sump
In peace till the last trump.

Yet, I've a notion, like the rest of us,
You'll take the cage, my friend,
For going down the pit ;
And be as eager as the best of us
For the night-shift to end—
To see the last of it
When you've been down a bit.

IN COURSE OF TIME

THE sarsen-stone,
Door-post of temple, altar-throne
Of some old god, or monument
Erected by a warrior host
To mark the fallen chieftain's tomb,
In course of time has come
To serve the old black sow for scratching-post.

A lad's light word,
Breathed low and scarcely heard
Or heeded in the babblement
And blare of other tongues, has time
Remembered, and the souls of men
Again and yet again
Take fire at that dead lad's undying rhyme.

PIG-IRON

THE crowbars loosed the plug of clay,
And bursting from the furnace' side
The spouting molten metal gushed
In a tumultuous seething tide

That surged into the winter night
With an exultant white-hot flare
And blinded heaven and all its stars
And the cold moon in one fierce glare,

Till in the mould of channelled sand
It cooled to red : then dull and slow
It crawled in grey congealing stream
That gradually ceased to flow :

When clinking crowbars snapped the chilled
And brittle metal short, and soon
In stark cold pigs the iron lay
Rigid beneath the icy moon.

And so the passionate seething tide
Of youth, the fury and the fire
That burned up heaven and earth in one
Exultant outburst of desire,

Grows dull and sluggish ; and too soon
Shall my heart's metal, dead and cold,
Await the crowbar's snapping stroke,
Indifferent in its channelled mould.

LABOUR-IN-VAIN

SNELL moans the east wind,
Chill drizzles the rain
Round the lone steading
Of Labour-in-vain.

Blind are the windows
With never a pane,
And reekless the chimneys
Of Labour-in-vain.

Byres empty of cattle,
Barns empty of grain,
And naked the roof-tree
Of Labour-in-vain.

Yet, gaunt, peaked and sallow
As moons on the wane,
The ghosts of old tenants
Haunt Labour-in-vain.

And shriller than peesweeps
Their voices complain
And greet for the ruin
Of Labour-in-vain—

*Though life was one heartbreak
Of trouble and pain,
Would we were still living
At Labour-in-vain.*

*Though life was a struggle,
The stress and the strain
Knitted our heart-strings
To Labour-in-vain.*

*We tilled the sour acres
And sowed the scant grain,
And hoped for a harvest
At Labour-in-vain.*

*And beaten and broken
In body and brain
We breathed our last sadly
At Labour-in-vain.*

*In death there is nothing
To lose or to gain
While at least hope was left us
At Labour-in-vain.*

Snell moans the east wind,
Chill drizzles the rain
Round the lone steading
Of Labour-in-vain.

And shriller than peesweeps
Their voices complain
And greet for the ruin
Of Labour-in-vain.

THE PURPLE ORCHIS

YOU pluck the bloom to pieces with a smile,
Chattering heedlessly the while,
And I watch you strip the stalk
Of its purple pride of petals as you talk ;
And the flower, that when you came
Burst to flame
In the sunlight of your eyes,
Petal after petal dies,
As you pluck my heart to pieces with a smile,
Chattering heedlessly the while.

THE SAIL

A BOAT in the bay,
You say,
And watch with delight
The sail flash white.

A sail in the blue
For you,
A sail—but for me
My heart at sea.

ALL BEING WELL

*ALL being well, I'll come to you,
Sweetheart, before the year is through ;
And we shall find so much to do,
So much to tell.*

I read your letter through and through,
And dreamt of all we'd say and do,
Till in my heart the thought of you
Rang like a bell.

Now the bell tolls, my love, for you ;
For long before the year is through
You've gone where there is naught to do
And naught to tell.

Yet mayn't I find when life is through
The best is still to say and do,
When I at last may come to you,
All being well ?

IN THE WOOD

THE day you came upon us in the wood
You said no word but only glanced at me,
And then went on to talk of something else.

How could I tell you you'd misunderstood
When you—you said no word of it to me,
But talked so steadily of something else ?

If you had only spoken out I could
Have told you all and you forgiven me,
But you thought best to talk of something else.

Because your heart was troubled you thought good
To say no word about it and spare me :
So we must always talk of something else.

BURIED LOVE

I HEAR your spade
Delving the soft wet garden-mould,
And listen half-afraid
Lest you should chance dig up again the old
Long-buried golden dream that died
The day you came upon us side by side—

Lest unaware
 And only half-remembering
 You suddenly lay bare
 Your love of me that perished in the spring,
 And only see among the stones
 A huddle of unknown time-whitened bones :

And so forget the heart of golden flame
 That died the night misunderstanding came.

THE DARK GLEN

As we drop downward we shall lose the moon
 That in high heaven kept pace with us all night.
What matter ? I am wearied of her light.

Between the crags we shall not see the sun
 Kindle the fell-top with his earliest ray.
What matter though we slumber through the day ?

What, lose the golden days, the silver nights,
 For which so eagerly we climbed the steep ?
Love, I am weary, and I long for sleep.

Yet, rapt in slumber, we'll not even know,
 Lost in blind dreams, that we together rest.
I only know sleep comes, and sleep is best.

NO BARREN FLAME

THE poppy's flame has died,
 But sprinkled far and wide
 Its seeds abide
 Another harvest-tide.

Though passion's flame sink low,
 The seeds of fire we sow
 For weal or woe
 Through time shall burn and blow.

SURVIVAL

*If the worse comes to the worst
We can die but once, you said ;
Then you ventured all and first
Took your place among the dead.*

Sound you sleep, while I who dare
Venture naught but, quailing, stay
On the quag-edge of despair
Die a hundred deaths a day—

Die and live to die again :
Yet it's much to know that you
Did not venture all in vain,
That the worst you never knew.

HEWER OF WOOD

THE timber I have hewn, stacked high,
Would overtop Saint Mary's spire
That soars into the windy sky,
Yet it has only served for fuel
To feed one little cottage-fire—

Has only served to keep aglow
One ingle-nook when winter's storm
Raked heaven and earth with blinding snow—
A forest felled and lifelong labour
To keep a little household warm.

And that small fire that still devours
Fresh timber burns my life away :
The tale of gold and glooming hours
Of tree and man's the selfsame story—
Green flame, red flame, and ashes grey.

BEAUTY FOR ASHES

YOU may burn the golden glory of the gorse,
 But the roots into the rocky earth run deep,
 And the living bush will only glow to rarer fire of beauty
 When at last beneath the mould you lie asleep.

Beauty dies not though you blast and lay it waste,
 Though you turn the whole earth to a cinder-heap,
 From the ashes of your factories once again the ever-living
 Shall awake one April morning out of sleep.

THE PARTING

THERE was no reason why he should not smile,
 Bidding good-bye to me,
 And go his way light-heartedly—
 And yet !

There was no reason why I should not smile
 Happily for his sake,
 No reason why my heart should break—
 And yet !

THE DISASTER

AGAINST the sunset's rose
 Purple the pit-heap glows—
 The mound of slate and slack
 That all day long gloomed black :

And the gaunt shaft-wheel seems
 Hub to a wheel of dreams,
 With flaming spokes that whirl
 In a celestial swirl

Of hues beneath whose fire,
With patience naught can tire,
Quiet, with close-shawled head,
Each woman 'waits her dead.

THE MOSS

*THE cold bog-water clucks
At every step across
The black and quaking hags
Of Dead Man's Moss—*

And what's the hurry, squire,
To reach the house you hate?
Where there's no welcome none
Can come too late.

Why should you labour now
To lift another foot
When peace lies all about
The rushes' root?

Your empty house but holds
The dead dream of a fool:
But the end of all things waits
In any pool—

In any still black pool
Oblivion dark and deep
Awaits the heart that would
Forget in sleep.

YOUNG MAN CATCHIESIDE AND OLD MAN
JOBBLING

*OLD man, old man, whither are you hobbling?
Old man Jobling, whither are you going—
Battered hat and tattered coat and clogs in need of cobbling—
And the snell wind lowing and the mirk lift snowing?*

Young man Catchieside, and if I go afairing
 Who's declaring I'm too old for going—
 Dressed in Sunday-best and all? And why should I be caring
 For the snell wind lowing and the mirk lift snowing?

*Ay, but what will come of you as drifts get deep and deeper,
 Steep roads steeper, and your shanks too numb for going?*
 Happen I shall nap—I was ever a good sleeper
 With the snell wind lowing and the mirk lift snowing.

Deep will be your sleep . . . It's truth you are declaring—
 After fairing, whichever way we're going,
 Deep will be the sleep of all; so why should I be caring
 For the snell wind lowing and the mirk lift snowing?

THE LITTLE RED CALF

THE little red calf
 For a day and a half
 Has blinked in the light—
 His blue eyes adaze
 In the buttercup-blaze,
 He fancies the world is one bright
 Fresh field, green and yellow,
 A world where a fellow
 Whatever betide
 May snuggle in safety his mother's warm side.

Little brother, I too
 Once fancied as you
 The world was one fair
 Fresh meadow of flowers
 Until the black hours
 Burst on me and stripped the mead bare.
 O little red brother,
 Keep close to your mother
 Whatever betide,
 And snuggle as long as you may to her side!

.

THE BED AT THE INN

NEVER, I said,
Shall anything sever
Hearts that are wed
For ever and ever.
 And the swinging inn-sign
 Took up the refrain,
 Creaking and squeaking
 Again and again :
For ever and ever—
Ay, so they said,
All the young lovers
Who've lain on that bed.
They swore the same vow,
The true or false-hearted,
Yet all of them now
Has life or death parted,
All of them parted
For ever and ever—
And ever new lovers
Brag boldly of "Never !"

THE STONES

THE plank was covered, so last night
 I had to leap the flooded burn ;
 And as I landed in the fern
 I scared an owl to startled flight.

Sharp in my ear it screeched ; its cry
 Sang through my very marrow-bones,
 Curdling my heart's blood, as the Stones
 Loomed gaunt against the starless sky.

As through my being's black unknown
 Caverns that skirl went echoing,
 My feet were drawn into the ring
 Of huddled shapes of druid-stone :

BEAUTY FOR ASHES

Victim of some ancestral dread,
 My gullet bared to meet the knife,
 Hanging upon the edge of life
 Over the unseen clutching dead

Crouched in the core of night, the sheer
 Primeval horror of the dark,
 I cowered—when at my feet a lark
 Rose with a twitter sweet and clear :

And as he sang the song he sings
 An hour before the break of day,
 The spell snapped, and above the brae
 My heart too soared on dewy wings.

THE QUARRY

As the windhover
 Drops on the shrew,
 Love, O young lover,
 Swoops down on you,
 Bears your heart heavenward,
 Tears it in two ;

Swift with his capture
 Soars through the light—
 Yours the fierce rapture
 Of agonised flight,
 Talon-torn, terror-winged,
 Into blind night.

THE PEARL

AND is this all
 You bring up from the bottom of the sea ?
 I watched you strip and poise and recklessly
 Dive headlong down, as though to wrest the key
 From the profundity
 Of time's unfathomable mystery—

Only a pearl,
 A little fragile globe of fleckless white,
 You bring up, breathless, in your palm clutched tight,
 Trinket to make a girl's eyes kindle bright—
 Naught else you bring to light
 From the dark chambers of old ocean's night ?

*Only a pearl—
 All colour fused in one white glow, all sound
 In breathless silence blended, all form bound
 In the clean compass of the perfect round—
 Beauty, in chaos drowned,
 Borne to the living light from deeps profound !*

THE TOLL

*Ho, ferry, ho !
 The river is in spate :
 You cannot cross to-night.
 Yet I must go
 To-night : I cannot wait
 Till morning light.*

Come, you too then
 Must grasp the guiding-rope
 And haul the boat with me—
 Grasp as doomed men
 Clutching at their last hope.
Ay, willingly !

Before we land,
 Come, pay your passage, if you'd live
 To draw another breath—
 Unloose one hand . . .
*See, with both hands I give
 The full toll—death !*

NORTHERN SPRING

O SKEIN of wild-geese, flying
 Through April's starry blue,
 Your harsh and eager crying
 Searches through and through
 My heart till it takes flight
 Arrow-like with you
 To pierce the Northern night,
 Shedding flakes of light
 From wings of flashing white
 Through tingling airs aquiver
 On tossing waves that shiver
 Crystal berg and floe—
 On crashing ghylls and forces of winter's melting snow.

When down the watercourses
 The spate of April dins,
 Like hoofs of countless horses
 Thunder the threshing linns
 As leaping 'twixt the scars
 Bright froth spurts and spins
 And sprays the leafing spars
 Of woods that rake the stars ;
 And shattering bonds and bars
 My spirit pours in thunder
 Of torrents, trampling under
 Dead winter's slothful dreams,
 Till life's a singing tumult of April-wakened streams.

THE UNDYING FIRE

WHAT will become of you, flesh and bone,
 When I at last must leave you alone ?

*When you have left us, bird of the breast,
 Thankfully, endlessly we shall rest.
 Long have you fluttered us, urging us ever
 To ventures beyond our utmost endeavour,
 Fretting us, driving us on and on
 Until, breath failing and strength nigh gone,*

*We have longed for the day when, buried deep
In the passionless earth, we shall sink to sleep,
When you shall be free to wander the air
And we shall neither know nor care.*

Think you, poor dreamers, you shall find rest
Even in earth's most secret breast ?
Know you not then that life's desire
Has burned in the earth with a heart of fire
Ever since out of chaos she came
Borne on pinions of singing flame,
And not an atom, but in hot strife
Perishing, flares to a fuller life,
And death that seems a dreamless sleep
Is but life burning more fierce and deep ?

OUTWARD BOUND

THE harbour-lights have dwindled
To sparks on a grey shore
Which fades into the sunset
That we shall see no more
Above our own land kindled.

As one by one extinguished
The lights of home go out,
It's time to face the onset
Of night, to turn about—
All thoughts of ease relinquished—

To face the whirling welter,
And drive before the storm
That knows not dawn nor sunset—
Our wits to keep us warm,
And courage our sole shelter.

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Gibson, Wilfrid

AUTHOR

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